

E.E. Smith's THE GALAXY PRIMES

Part 2

# AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

APRIL

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WARNING  
FROM  
THE STARS

TEST ROCKET !

APRIL, 1959

AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

VOL. 33 NO. 4



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# AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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APRIL 1959

Volume 33 Number 4

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# E d i t o r i a l

**E**DITIONS often wonder if anybody outside ever reads the mast-head (that list of names at the side of the table of contents that tells you who is responsible for the horrors of any given month). They *know* some people read it. They do, scanning it meticulously for typographical errors. And their mothers and aunts read it. And sometimes, under threat of dire punishment, spouses and/or sweet-hearts.

If you read it, perhaps you wonder who these good folk are? So, with your leave, I thought I'd introduce the three key figures (you have already met me in these pages, and I don't count, anyway—they're always telling me) that make *Amazing* tick.

Mike Michaelson, our publisher, is the man who worries about how much the magazine costs, how much it sells, and what are we going to have in the issue *next* month. Young, dynamic, dark-haired, Mike has his sights set on making *Amazing* more successful than ever as a publishing venture.

Editor Cele Goldsmith is a lovely sight to behold. Tall, dark and willowy, she labors faithfully at the demanding job of dealing with authors, agents, artists; of working with printers; of selecting material; of putting together each month's issue; and of following up every last detail to *make sure the magazine gets out*.

Art Editor Sid Greiff is short, blonde and not willowy—thank goodness. When he manages to raise his head from beneath a pile of artists' sketches, type proofs and the assorted paraphernalia of his craft, he reveals a beatific smile. Sid thinks it wisest to keep snailing because he never knows when one of the BEMs will raise up off of the drawing and bite. That's the kind of realism he demands of his artists! Sid's only failing: he says he still doesn't know the difference between a humanoid and an android. Around this office, that's not easy!—NL

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*Don't believe in flying saucers? Neither do we, but that doesn't necessarily mean that there can be no other way for Earth to get its last . . .*

# WARNING FROM THE STARS

By RON COCKING

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

**I**T WAS a beautifully machined container, shaped like a two pound chocolate candy box, the color and texture of lead. The cover fitted so accurately that it was difficult to see where it met the lip on the base.

Yet when Forster lifted the container from the desk in the security guards' office, he almost hit himself in the face with it, so light was it.

He read the words clumsily etched by hand into the top surface with some sharp instrument:

**TO BE OPENED ONLY BY:**

Dr. Richard Forster,

Assistant Director,

Air Force Special Research  
Center,

Petersport, Md.

**CAUTION:** Open not later  
than 24 hours after receipt.

**DO NOT OPEN** in atmosphere

less than equivalent of 65,000 feet above M.S.L.

He turned the container over and over. It bore no other markings—no express label or stamps, no file or reference number, no return address.

It was superbly machined, he saw.

Tentatively he pulled at the container cover, it was as firm as if it had been welded on. But then, if the cover had been closed in the thin atmosphere of 65,000 feet, it would be held on by the terrific pressure of a column of air twelve miles high.

Forster looked up at the burly guard.

"Who left this here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, sir." The man's voice was as close to insolence as the difference in status would allow, and Forster bristled.

"I just clocked in an hour ago. There was a thick fog came on all of a sudden, and there was a bit of confusion when we were changing over. They didn't say anything about the box when I relieved."

"Fog?" Forster queried. "How could fog form on a warm morning like this?"

"You're the scientist, sir. You tell me. Went as fast as it came."

"Well — it looks like very sloppy security. The contents of this thing must almost certainly be classified. Give me the book and I'll sign for it. I'll phone you the file number when I find the covering instructions."

Forster was a nervous, over-conscientious little man, and his day was already ruined, because any departure from strict administrative routine worried and upset him. Only in his field of aviation medicine did he feel competent, secure.

He knew that around the center they contemptuously called him "Lilliput." The younger researchers were constantly trying to think up new ways to play jokes on him, and annoy him.

Crawley Preston, the research center's director and his chief, had been summoned to Washington the night before. Forster wished fervently that he was around to deal with this matter. Now that relations between East and West had reached the snapping point, the slightest deviation from security regulations usually meant a full-scale inquiry.

He signed for the container, and carried it out to the car, still seething impotently over the guard's insolence.

He placed it beside him on the front seat of his car and drove up to the building which housed part of the labs and also his office.

He climbed out, then as he slammed the door he happened to glance into the car again.

The seat covers were made of plastic in a maroon and blue plaid pattern. But where the box had rested there was a dirty grey rectangular patch that hadn't been there before.

Forster stared, then opened the door again. He rubbed his fingers over the discolored spot; it felt no different than the rest of the fabric. Then he placed the box over the area—it fitted perfectly.

He flopped down on the seat, his legs dangling out of the car, fighting down a sudden irrational wave of panic. He pushed the container to the other end of the seat.

*After all, he rationalized, plastics are notoriously unstable under certain conditions. This is probably a new alloy Washington wants tested for behavior under extreme conditions of temperature and pressure. What's gotten into you?*

He took a deep breath, picked up the box again. Where it had rested there was another discolored patch on the car seat covers.

Holding it away from him, Forster hurried into the office,





In his pressurized chamber, Forster read the startling message.

then dumped the box into a metal wastebasket. Then he went to a cabinet and pulled out a Geiger counter, carried it over to the wastebasket. As he pointed the probe at the box the familiar slow clicking reassured him, and feeling a little foolish he put the instrument back on its shelf.

Hurriedly, he went through his mail; there was nothing in it referring to the package. Then he called the classified filing section; nobody there knew anything about it either.

For some reason he couldn't explain to himself, he wasn't even surprised.

He stared into the wastebasket. The clumsily etched instructions glinted up at him: "*To be opened as soon as possible . . .*"

He picked up the phone and called the decompression chamber building.

There was no valid reason why he should have been self-conscious as he talked to the lab attendant in charge of the decompression tank. He used it a dozen times a month for tests and experiments, yet when he gave his instructions his voice was labored and strained.

"Some genius in Washington sent this thing down without any covering instructions, but it has to be opened in a hurry in a thin atmosphere. Er — I'd like you to stay on the intercom for a while in case it blows up in my face or something." He tried to laugh, but all that came out was a croak.

The attendant nodded indifferently, then helped Forster into the helmet of his pressure suit. He climbed up the steps into the chamber, pulling the airtight door shut behind him. He placed the box on the desk in front of the instrument panel, then turned back to push the door clamps into place.

For the first time in the hundreds of hours he'd spent in the tank, he knew the meaning of claustrophobia.

Mechanically, he plugged in his intercom and air lines, went through the other routine checks before ascent, tested communications with the lab attendant, then flicked the exhaust motor switch.

Now there was little to do except wait. He stared at the box; in the artificial light it seemed full of hidden menace, a knowing aliveness of its own . . .

Forster shrugged his shoulders impatiently, as though to throw off the vague blanket of uneasiness that was settling around him. So somebody had forgotten to send a covering message with the container, or else it had been mislaid—that could happen, although with security routine as strict as it was, the possibility was remote. All the same, it could happen. After all, what other explanation was there? What was it he was afraid of? There was something about it—

He glanced at the altimeter. The needle showed only 10,000 feet, and seemed to be crawling around the dial. He resolved not

to look at it for three minutes by the clock on the panel.

When he checked the altimeter again, it registered just over 30,000 feet. Not even half way yet.

As the pressure in the tank decreased, he began to be conscious of the need for "reverse breathing" — and he concentrated on using his tongue to check the flow of air into his lungs, then using the thoracic muscles to exhale against the higher pressure inside the suit.

Time seemed to be passing in micro-seconds . 25,000 feet  
30,000 . 40,000 50,000.

At 62,500 feet he gently tested the cover of the container again; it lifted.

As the altimeter needle flickered on the 65,000-foot mark, he cut the exhaust motor and picked up the box. The cover slipped off easily.

His feeling of anticlimax was almost ludicrous. As he looked in, all the box contained was a flattened roll of some greyish material.

He took it out; despite its comparative bulk, it was feather-light. It had the appearance of metal, but was as porous and pliable as a good grade of bond paper. He could not feel its texture through his heavy gloves. He took a good look.

It was new all right—no doubt Washington wanted some tests run on it, although without covering instructions and data this trip was wasted. But some heads would roll when he re-

ported back on the way the container had been shipped in.

He started to unroll the material to get a better look at it, then he saw that it was covered with cramped, closely spaced handwriting in a purplish ink—handwriting that was elusively familiar.

Then he read the words written in neat capitals at the top, the name of the man with the familiar handwriting, and fear came back, clamped cold fingers around his throat:

*James Rawdon Bentley*

Dear Dick, the writing went on, Take a large economy-size grip on yourself. I know this is going to sound like a voice from the dead, but I'm very much alive and kicking—in the best of health in fact .

The writing blurred, and instinctively Forster put his fist up to rub his eyes, only to meet the hard plastic of his helmet visor. James Rawdon Bentley.

It was January 18, 1951, three years ago, and the jagged line of the Australian coast stretched like a small-scale map to the black curve of the horizon.

From the converted bomber that was his flying lab, Forster could see the other American observation plane cruising on a parallel course, about half a mile away, and beyond it downwind the fringe of the billowing cloud dome of the super-secret British thermonuclear shot.

Then suddenly Bentley's voice

from the other plane was crackling over the earphones, sharp and urgent:

"Our Geigers and scintillometers are going crazy! We're getting out of here! There's something coming inside a light . . ."

Silence. Forster had watched in helpless horror as the other ship dipped a silver wing, then nosed down ever so slowly, it seemed . . . down . . . in a dive that seemed to take hours as Forster's plane tracked it, ending in a tiny splash like a pebble being thrown into a pond; then the grimly beautiful iridescence of oil and gasoline spreading across the glassy waters of the Timor Sea.

No parachutes had opened on the long journey down. An Australian air sea rescue launch and helicopter were at the scene of the crash in minutes, but neither bodies nor survivors had been found, then or later.

"Everything okay, Doctor Forster?"

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "Yes . . . everything's okay . . . just routine."

Forster focussed his eyes on the writing again. There was no doubt at all that it was Bentley's. They had roomed and studied together for four years at MIT, and then there had been a couple of years' post-graduate work after that. During all that time they had used each other's notes constantly.

But Bentley was dead.

Forster read on, stunned:

First, you'll want to know what happened over the Timor Sea after the shot. Put very simply, I, the rest of the technicians, and the crew of the B-29 were transhipped to another vehicle—without any damage to ourselves. How, I'm not allowed to explain at this stage. Actually, they only wanted me, but it wasn't feasible to collect me and leave the rest behind, so they're all here, safe and well.

Who are "they," and where am I? The second question I can't answer—not allowed to. "They," roughly translated, are "The Shining Ones," which doesn't tell you anything, of course. Briefly, they're a couple of light-years ahead of Earth in evolution — mentally, morally, and physically, although I use the last word loosely. Too bad that English is a commercial language, it's so hard to discuss really abstract ideas.

Why am I here? The whole reason for this message is wrapped up in the answer to that.

As you probably know, Project Longfall, which I was heading up was delayed about a year due to my removal. That was the sole purpose, although I and the rest of us are getting special instruction to keep us occupied.

About the same time, they also took several other key people from Britain, Russia, and the United States. Others were already here.

The idea then was *delay*—to delay more test shots of

atomic weapons, in the hope that East and West would come to some agreement. Now, because of the growing volume of tests, and the critical tension which prevails, delay will no longer suffice, and far more drastic steps are to be taken.

I wish you could be here for only a few minutes to see what happens after a multi-megaton thermonuclear test shot is set off on Earth.

I can't describe it in terms which would have any relation to your present knowledge of physics. All I can say is that life here is intimately bound up with the higher laws of electro-magnetism which at present are only being guessed at on your level. It's not the radioactivity which you know as such which causes the trouble—there are neutralizing devices throughout the planetary system to take care of that. The damage is caused by an ultra-ultra-short wave radiation which not even the most sensitive scintillometer you have can pick up, a very subtle by-product of every chain reaction.

It doesn't have too much immediate effect on the lower forms of life—including human beings, if you'll pardon the expression. But here, it causes a ghastly carnage, so ghastly it sickens me even to think about it for a second.

The incredible thing is that the people here could stop Earth from firing another shot if they

wished to, and at 24 hours' notice, but their philosophy is totally opposed to force, even when it means their own destruction. That will give you an idea of the kind of people they are.

(Here they say that Einstein was on the fringe of discovering the theory involved when he died, but was having trouble with the mathematics. Remember how Einstein always complained that he was really a poor mathematician?)

But with atomic warfare threatening to break out on Earth at any minute, They have got to do something.

This is what they plan to do—this is what they *are going to do*.

Starting within a few hours after you receive this message, a mass removal of key scientists will begin. They will take 20, 30, or 40—roughly equal numbers from both sides—every few hours as technical conditions allow. That will go on until East and West agree to drop this whole mad weapons race. It will be done quietly, peacefully. Nobody will be hurt except by a fluke. But if needs be, they will lift every major scientific brain off the face of Earth to stop the present drift to disaster for everybody. There are no weapons, no devices that you have at present, which can stop this plan going into effect. There it is—it's as simple as that.

If you knew what you were really headed for, it would need

no steps from here to make both sides on Earth stop this horrible foolishness in a moment.

The lesson of Mars is part of the orientation course here. (I'm *not* on Mars). I'm using up space, so I'll go into note form for a bit. Martians had an atomic war—forgot they had to breathe . . . destroyed 60 per cent of their atmosphere . . . canals on Mars aren't . . . they're closely-spaced line of shafts leading to underground cities

view from Earth telescopes, shaft mouths appear as dots which run together into lines due to eye-fatigue . . . British Royal Astronomical Society figured that out 30 years ago at least . . . see papers on their proceedings . . . photographs here show monsters created by wholesale mutations, lasted about four generations before reproduction failed . . . now only vegetation on Mars saw pictures of last survivors horrible . . . I was ill for days after

imagine having to take 40 separate breaths after making a single step!

Getting back to the others here . . . a regular U. N. Remember O'Connor and Walters in our class? They're here. Check, you'll find that O'Connor is "detached" from Oak Ridge and Walters from Aiken for "special duty." That's Central Intelligence's story for their disappearance.

Remember those top German boys the Russians were supposed

to have gotten to before the Allies could reach them after the Nazi collapse? *They're here too!* And Kamalnikov, and Pretchkin of the Russian Academy.

Believe me (the style and the writing was a little less urgent again now), I've had all the intellectual stuffing knocked out of me here.

We all have had, for that matter. We're supposed to be the cream of the crop, but imagine sitting down to instruction from people whose I.Q.s start where yours leaves off!

But what has really made most of us here feel pretty humble is the way they have demolished Earth's so-called "scientific method"—and used the method itself to prove that it doesn't stand up!

You know how we've always been taught to observe, collect data, then erect a theory to fit the data, a theory which has to be modified when other data came along which don't fit into it.

Here they work the opposite way—they say: "Know the fundamental principles governing the operation of the universe and then all the pieces fit together inside this final Truth."

I understand now why so many of the Oak Ridge boys turned to religion after they had been exposed to the electron microscope for a while—they realized they had gone as far as their "scientific" training would ever take them.

Time and space are running

out. I know all this must sound confused and incredible, Dick; I'm still confused myself. But I want you to think about what I've written, then take the action you think best. I know it won't be easy for you.

If you think this is some maniac's idea of a joke, you'll have proof very soon that it isn't, because *one of the people at your Center is due to leave for here any time now.*

You're wondering why I used this weird and wonderful means of communication. The problem was to find a writing material which would stand up in Earth's atmosphere—oddly enough, it's not the oxygen which causes the trouble, but the so-called "inert" nitrogen. The container will probably not disintegrate for a couple of days at sea level atmospheric pressure, but this material I'm writing on would not last more than a few seconds. That's one reason they picked you—most people just don't have a spare decompression chamber up in the attic! The other reason was that with your photographic memory, you'll know this is my handwriting, beyond the shadow of a doubt, I hope.

I'm sure you've sat in that pressure suit long enough. But remember, if you want to take another look at this, you'll have to put it back in the container before you go "down."

Wishing you all you would wish for yourself,

Jim.

Forster examined the signature. That was the way Bentley made the capital J—it looked almost like a T, with just a faint hook on the bottom of the downstroke. Then the way it joined the—

"Hey, Doc—are you going to tie up the tank all day? I've got work to do."

Forster recognized the voice on the intercom as Tom Summerford's. Summerford was one of the crop of recent graduates to join the Center—brash, noisy, irresponsible like the rest of them. He knew Forster hated being called "Doc," so he never lost an opportunity to use the word. True, he was gifted and well-trained, but he was a ring-leader in playing the practical jokes on Forster which might have been funny in college, but which only wasted a research team's time in these critical days.

Practical joke.

Anger flooded over him.

Yes, this was all a macabre game cooked up by Summerford, with the help of some of his pals. Probably they were all out there now, snickering among themselves, waiting to see his face when he came out of the decompression chamber . . . waiting to gloat . . .

"Hey Doc! You still with us?"

"I'll be out very shortly," Forster said grimly. "Just wait right there."

He spun the air inlet controls; impatiently, he watched as the

altimeter needle began its anti-clockwise movement.

He'd call a staff meeting right away, find the culprits and suspend them from duty. Preston would have to back him up. If Summerford proved to be the ringleader, he would insist on his dismissal, Forster decided. And he would see to it that the young punk had trouble getting another post.

The fantastic waste of time involved in such an elaborate forgery . . . Forster trembled with indignation. And using the name of a dead man, above all a scientist who had died in the interests of research, leaving behind him a mystery which still troubled the Atomic Energy Commission, because nobody had ever been able to explain that sudden dive in a plane which was apparently functioning perfectly, and flown by a veteran crew .

He glanced down at the roll.

Was it his imagination, or had the purplish ink begun to fade? He ran a length of it through his fingers, and then he saw that in places there were gaps where the writing had disappeared altogether. He glanced up at the altimeter needle, which was sliding by the 24,000-foot mark.

He looked back at his hands again, just in time to see the roll part in two places, leaving only the narrow strip he held between his gloved fingers.

He put the strip on the desk, and bent clumsily in his suit to

retrieve the other pieces from the floor. But wherever he grabbed it, it fell apart. Now it seemed to be melting before his eyes. In a few seconds there was nothing.

He straightened up. The strip he had left on the desk had disappeared, too. No ash, no residue. Nothing.

His thought processes seemed to freeze. He glanced mechanically at the altimeter. It read 2,500 feet.

He grabbed at the two pieces of the container. They still felt as rigid as ever. He fitted them together carefully, gaining a crumb of security from the act.

He realized vaguely that the altimeter needle was resting on zero, but he had no idea how long he had been sitting there, trying to find a thread of logic in the confused welter of thoughts, when he heard the scrape of metal on metal as somebody wrestled with the door clamps from the outside.

He was certain of only one thing. His memory told him that the signature that was no longer a signature had been written by Jim Rawdon, who couldn't possibly have survived that crash into the Timor Sea .

From behind, somebody was fumbling with his helmet connections, then fresh air and familiar sounds rushed in on him as the helmet was taken away.

Summerford's thin, intelligent face was opposite his.



"Doc! Are you all right?" he was asking sharply. For once, there was no superciliousness in his voice.

"I'm fine," Forster said heavily. "I—I've got a headache. Stayed in here too long, I suppose."

"What's in the box?" Summerford asked.

The way he asked told Forster at once that the youngster knew nothing about it.

"Er—just some half-baked idea out of the Pentagon. Some colonel trying to justify his existence." He clutched the box to him as though Summerford might try to take it away. "The tank's all yours."

He turned and clambered out of the chamber. He put the box down on the concrete floor, and climbed out of the pressure suit, watching the box all the time. It seemed to gleam up at him, as though it had eyes, full of silent menace.

He realized vaguely that Summerford was standing in front of him again, looking anxious.

"Are you quite sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Forster said, hardly recognizing his own voice.

He picked up the box and stumbled out, heading for his office.

When he walked in, his secretary was answering the line fitted with a scrambler, which connected directly with the Pentagon.

"General Morganson," she said, handing him the receiver.

Forster took the receiver, sat down at his desk and took a deep breath, fighting hard to regain his self control.

"Forster," he said into the mouthpiece when the office door closed behind the girl.

"Forster! What the dickens has happened to Preston? My driver met the train here this morning, but there was no sign of him. But the Pullman porter checked him in last night, and we found all his gear and papers in his compartment!"

"He left here in plenty of time to catch the train, General." Forster heard himself say. "He took the train to get a night's rest." He realized how irrelevant the last statement was only after he had made it.

The General was talking again . . . important meeting with the Joint Chiefs . . . whole briefing team was being held up . . . he'd reported it to the C.I.A. as a precautionary measure

Forster could see the words on the roll, the roll that wasn't, as though they were engraved on his eye-retinas: *As a beginning, and to prove this isn't just a lot of hocus-pocus, one of the people at your Center is due to leave for here any time now.*

"General," Forster broke in hoarsely. "I've got some very important information which you must have. I'll leave by heliplane right away."

He replaced the phone receiver in its cradle, wondering how convincing he would be able to

make his story. At least, even if he didn't have Bentley's letter, he had the container. That should help.

But when he looked across the desk, he saw that it too had disappeared, without a trace.

General Morganson was the newest product of the Atomic Age, half soldier, half scientist—shrewd and perceptive, an intellectual giant.

He listened carefully, without comment or change of expression, as Forster doggedly went through his story in chronological order.

Half way through, he held up his hand and started pushing buttons on the console built into his desk. Within a few moments men began filing into the room, and sat down around Forster.

Then the general motioned to the clerk seated in the corner by a tape recorder.

"Gentlemen, listen to this playback and then I'll have Dr. Forster here go on from there."

What was left of Forster's confidence leaked away as he heard his own diffident voice filling the room again. It was like being awake in the middle of a weird dream.

But when the tape recorder hissed into silence, he went on, staring straight ahead of him in quiet desperation.

When he ended his story, there was silence for a moment. Everyone sat motionless.

Then Morganson looked up and around.

"Well gentlemen? Mr. Bates, C.I.A. first."

This was no longer a story told by one man; it had become a problem, a situation to be evaluated objectively.

"Well, sir the only part of the thing I can comment on at this point is the stuff about O'Connor and Walters. That checks. They both disappeared without a trace. It was treated as a maximum security situation, and we did give out the story they had been assigned to special duty." He glanced briefly at Forster. "Up until now, we assumed that only the directors at Aiken and Oak Ridge knew the real situation—outside of the Atomic Energy Commission and C.I.A., of course. This represents a very serious leak—or ." His voice trailed away.

"Colonel Barfield, Intelligence?"

The young colonel tried to sound flippant, unsuccessfully.

"General, acting on the assumption the story is true, it would answer about two hundred question marks in our files. Maybe more, with further study."

The C.I.A. man cleared his throat and raised a finger

"For everybody's information," he said, "a preliminary field check shows that Dr. Preston's train was stopped for ten minutes by fog last night. The train's radar installation failed simultaneously. There wouldn't be anything odd about that except the temperature at the time

about 65 degrees, and the humidity was only 55 per cent. Consider that, gentlemen.

"Theoretically, fog can't form under such conditions. Similar local fog occurred on the occasions when O'Connor and Walters were reported missing. The Met. people couldn't explain that, either. That's all."

Morganson sat up straight, as though he had suddenly made a decision.

"I don't think there's any value in further discussion at this point. You will all have transcripts of Dr. Forster's statement within a few minutes. According to that statement, we are due to lose a number of key men in the next few hours. I'll have Code One emergency precautions instituted at all research establishments, and I think the chairman of the Joint Chiefs should hear from me right away. Colonel Barfield, I'd like you to ask Colonel Malinowski, the Russian military attaché to see me here not later than an hour from now. We'll have a full dress conference here at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning, with written evaluation reports in detail from all branches. Dr. Forster, consider yourself assigned to Pentagon duty as of now, and until further notice."

Forster sat, dazed, until he realized that the others had left, and the general was standing in front of him.

"Go get some rest, Forster," the other man said with surpris-

ing gentleness. "You've had a tough day."

As Forster slept that early summer night, weathermen across the world were marking their weather maps with thousands of observations—feathery wind arrows, temperatures, barometric pressures and relative humidities.

Then, as they drew their isobars, the pattern for the northern hemisphere emerged. A giant high pressure system with its center in northern Oklahoma promised warm fair weather across America. Another, centered east of the Ural Mountains, forecast clear weather for most of Europe and northern Asia.

A low pressure trough between was dropping light warm rain on the green fields of England, but from Seattle to Washington, D. C., from Stettin to Vladivostock the sun was rising or setting in clear skies.

Then about 9 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, a thickening mist descended over warm and drowsy southwest South Carolina. It was a fog that was not a fog, observers said afterwards, because there was no damp, no coldness—just a steady loss of visibility until a man couldn't see his hand held up in front of his face, even though a bright moon was shining. Most of the reporting night shift at the Aiken hydrogen bomb plant never reached the tightly-guarded gates. Those who did were not allowed in.

At the same hour, across the world at the newly-built underground heavy water factory of Rossilovskigorsk, west of the southern tip of Lake Baikal, the late morning sun cast deep shadows into the gaping holes in the hillside which marked the plant entrances and exits. Deep below, miles of filtration chambers hissed quietly as they prepared their deadly concentrate.

Then, without warning, the sun grew watery and paled, and within a few minutes a haze began to form at ground level. It grew thicker and thicker; the sun became a dim orange sphere, then was blotted out. Total darkness enveloped the area.

And at the same hour, the watchers manning the lonely circle of probing radar domes, facing each other across the frozen wastes of the Arctic, cursed softly in Russian and English as their scopes sweeping the upper air first went blank and then dark.

They were shaken men at the meeting in General Morganson's office the next morning.

"Over 30 key men gone from Aiken," Morganson was saying. "In terms of goals, it means that our 1960 program now cannot possibly be fulfilled until 1965. If the situation develops as forecast in Dr. Forster's statement, our entire nuclear weapons program will grind to a halt within two weeks. If we drain men from civilian research, it will cause a total breakdown in the civilian

atomic power production program. As you all know, the nation's entire economic expansion program is based on the availability of that power. Without it, industry will be forced into a deep freeze. That in turn means we might as well run up a white flag on the White House lawn."

He smiled thinly. "I would be a lot more worried than I am except we have the first indications that the other side is in the same boat. I broke every regulation in the book last night when I talked to Malinowski. I took the liberty of warning him, on the basis that there was nothing to lose. His reaction then was that it was all a Wall Street-capitalist plot—'psychological warfare,' he called it.

"He phoned me an hour ago. Sounded as though he'd just seen a ghost. He said the Russian ambassador had asked for an appointment with the Secretary of State this morning . . ."

Forster, bewildered and out of his depth in these global problems, let the flood of words pour over him.

Then he realized that Morganson was staring at him over the telephone receiver at his ear, and that the room was very quiet.

Then Morganson said respectfully: "Very well, Mr. President. We'll have Doctor Forster there."

Forster was relegated to the sidelines after his interview with the grave-faced man in the

White House. Events were moving swiftly—events which Forster could read behind the blurred black headlines of the newspapers.

The Russian ambassador was closeted with the Secretary of State for a record six-hour talk. Then the Soviet Foreign Minister took off for Washington at 30 minutes' notice, and another record was made when he spent all day with the President. The Washington columnists began to hint of lessening tension in the cold war, and the wire services carried reports of Russian radio broadcasts talking of a new era of cooperation between East and West.

Only fragments of the broadcasts could be monitored, because radio reception had suddenly deteriorated right across the world. The reports could not be confirmed because Russia had cut all phone communication with the outside world. There was no possible mode of contact.

Meanwhile, in the United States, television reception was blacking out for hours at a time, with no explanation available. The Civil Aeronautics Administration and the Air Force banned all plane movements under instrument flight conditions, because radar navigational equipment had become so unreliable as to be useless.

Newspapers across the nation were reporting sudden fogs of short duration which baffled local weathermen. The U. S.

Weather Bureau in Washington refused to comment.

For the first time in the history of an East-West conference, there was no haggling, no propaganda speeches. Hour after hour, even as the talks went on, the cream of the world's scientific brains quietly continued to disappear, it was revealed later.

In three days, the major powers accomplished what they had failed to do in the previous 15 years. Just 4 days and 21 hours after Forster had first talked to General Morganson at the Pentagon, a treaty was signed ending the world atomic weapons race.

And it had all happened, was over and done, before the people of the globe could realize what was happening, before they could rise in mass panic in the face of the incredible unknown.

Almost immediately after the announcement, radio and radar communications suddenly returned to normal, and reports of the mysterious fogs ceased.

Back at the Center, as he walked down the floodlit ramp of the heliport towards his car, Forster found himself thinking of the experimental work on the dream state which he had performed as a graduate student. He knew that a dream which might take half an hour to recount took only a fraction of a second to occur in the sub-conscious of the sleeper as he awoke.

It was the same way with the events of the last five days; already details were becoming

fuzzy and blurred as though they had happened five years ago.

He opened the car door, and the soft glow of the dome light filled the interior.

Then he saw again the neat rectangular discoloration on the seat covers, and the jolt back to reality was almost a physical thing. Relief, overwhelming, flooded over him.

He looked up into the indigo-velvet sky. Above him was the enormous triangle formed by

Deneb, Vega, and Altair. Framed within it were a thousand other dimmer stars, but all, he knew, far, far bigger than the speck of solidified gases called Earth.

Somewhere out there, living, thinking, breathing was Bentley.

"Good night," Forster said out loud.

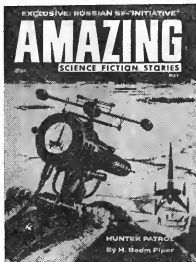
And somehow, he was sure he wasn't talking into thin air.

**THE END**

### COMING NEXT MONTH

**A major scoop highlights the May issue of AMAZING: the first English translation of a Soviet science-fiction story.**

Its title is best translated as "Initiative." The story of a robot that breaks free of its masters' control, it is not only an example of the Russian approach to s-f, but yields a revealing insight into Soviet thought about free will.



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**Be sure to reserve your copy now at your newsdealer's—the May Amazing, on sale April 9.**

# GOLDEN THE SHIP WAS— OH! OH! OH!

By CORDWAINER SMITH

*A strange tale of a strange war in a strange time, when the Lords of the Instrumentality sent one ship against a world.*

**A**GGRESSION started very far away.

War with Raumsog came about twenty years after the great Cat Scandal which, for a while, threatened to cut the entire planet Earth from the desperately essential santaclara drug. It was a short war and a bitter one.

Corrupt, wise, weary old Earth fought with masked weapons, since only hidden weapons could maintain so ancient a sovereignty—sovereignty which had long since lapsed into a titular paramouncy among the communities of mankind. Earth won and the others lost, because the leaders of Earth never put other considerations ahead of survival. And this time, they thought, they were finally and really threatened.

The Raumsog war was never known to the general public ex-

cept for the revival of wild old legends about golden ships.

On Earth the Lords of the Instrumentality met. The presiding chairman looked about and said, "Well, gentlemen, all of us have been bribed by Raumsog. We have all been paid off individually. I myself received six ounces of stroon in pure form. Will the rest of you show better bargains?"

Around the room, the councilors announced the amounts of their bribes.

The chairman turned to the secretary. "Enter the bribes in the record and then mark the record off-the-record."

The others nodded gravely.

"Now we must fight. Bribery is not enough. Raumsog has been threatening to attack Earth. It's been cheap enough to let him

threaten, but obviously we don't mean to let him do it."

"How are you going to stop him, lord chairman?" growled a gloomy old member, "Get out the golden ships?"

"Exactly that." The chairman looked deadly serious.

There was a murmurous sigh around the room. The golden ships had been used against an inhuman life-form many centuries before. They were hidden somewhere in non-space and only a few officials of Earth knew how much reality there was to them. Even at the level of the Lords of the Instrumentality the council did not know precisely what they were.

"One ship," said the chairman of the Lords of the Instrumentality, "will be enough."

It was.

The dictator Lord Raumsog on his planet knew the difference some weeks later.

"You can't mean that," he said. "You can't mean it. There is no such ship that size. The golden ships are just a story. No one ever saw a picture of one."

"Here is a picture, my lord," said the subordinate.

Raumsog looked at it. "It's a trick. Some piece of trick photography. They distorted the size. The dimensions are wrong. Nobody has a ship that size. You could not build it, or if you did build it, you could not operate it. There just is not any such thing—" He babbled on for a few more sentences before he realized

that his men were looking at the picture and not at him.

He calmed down.

The boldest of the officers resumed speaking. "That one ship is ninety million miles long, Your Highness. It shimmers like fire, but moves so fast that we cannot approach it. But it came into the center of our fleet almost touching our ships, stayed there twenty or thirty thousandths of a second. There it was, we thought. We saw the evidence of life on board: light beams waved; they examined us and then, of course, it lapsed back into non-space. Ninety million miles, Your Highness. Old Earth has some stings yet and we do not know what the ship is doing."

The officers stared with anxious confidence at their overlord.

Raumsog sighed. "If we must fight, we'll fight. We can destroy that, too. After all, what is size in the spaces between the stars? What difference does it make whether it is nine miles or nine million or ninety millions?" He sighed again. "Yet I must say ninety million miles is an awful big size for a ship. I don't know what they are going to do with it."

He did not.

It is strange—strange and even fearful—what love of Earth can do to men. Tedesco, for example.

Tedesco's reputation was far-flung. Even among the Scanners, even among the Go-Captains whose thoughts were rarely on



such matters, Tedesco was known for his raiment, the foppish arrangement of his mantle of office and his bejeweled badges of authority. Tedesco was known too for his languid manner and his luxurious sybaritic living. When the message came it found Tedesco in his usual character.

He was lying on the air draft with his brain pleasure centers plugged in to the triggering current. So deeply lost in pleasure was he that the food, the women, the clothing, the books of his apartments were completely neglected and forgotten. All pleasure save the pleasure of electricity acting on the brain was forgotten.

So great was the pleasure that Tedesco had been plugged into the current for twenty hours without interruption—a manifest disobedience of the rule which set six hours as maximum pleasure.

And yet, when the message came—relayed to Tedesco's brain by the infinitesimal crystal set there for the transmittal of messages so secret that even thought was too vulnerable to interception—when the message came Tedesco struggled through layer after layer of bliss and unconsciousness.

*The ships of gold—the golden ships—for Earth is in danger.*

Tedesco struggled. *Earth is in danger.* With a sigh of bliss he made the effort to press the button which turned off the current. And with a sigh of cold reality he took a look at the world about

him and turned to the job at hand. Quickly he prepared to wait upon the Lords of the Instrumentality.

The chairman of the Lords of the Instrumentality sent out the Lord Admiral Tedesco to command the golden ship. The ship itself, larger than most stars, was an incredible monstrosity. Centuries before it had frightened away non-human aggressors from a forgotten corner of the galaxies.

The Lord Admiral walked back and forth on his bridge. The cabin was small, twenty feet by thirty. The control area, on the ship measured nothing over a hundred feet. All the rest was a golden bubble of the fainting ship, nothing more than thin and incredulity rigid foam with tiny wires cast across it so as to give the illusion of a hard metal and strong defenses.

The ninety million miles of length were right. Nothing else was.

The ship was a gigantic dummy, the largest scarecrow ever conceived by the human mind.

Century after century it had rested in non-space between the stars, waiting for use. Now it proceeded helpless and defenseless against a militant and crazy dictator Raumsog and his horde of hard-fighting and very real ships.

Raumsog had broken the disciplines of space. He had killed the Scanners. He had imprisoned the Go-Captains. He had used

renegades and apprentices to pilage the immense interstellar ships and had armed the captive vessels to the teeth. In a system which had not known real war, and least of all war against Earth, he had planned well.

He had bribed, he had swindled, he had propagandized. He expected Earth to fall before the threat itself. Then he launched his attack.

With the launching of the attack, Earth itself changed. The corrupt rascals became what they were in title: the leaders and the defenders of mankind.

Tedesco himself had been an elegant fop. War changed him into an aggressive captain, swinging the largest vessel of all time as though it were a tennis bat.

He cut in on the Raumsog fleet hard and fast.

Tedesco shifted his ship right, north, up, over.

He appeared before the enemy and eluded them—down, forward, right, over.

He appeared before the enemy again. One successful shot from them could destroy an illusion on which the safty of mankind itself depended. It was his business not to allow them that shot.

Tedesco was not a fool. He was fighting his own strange kind of war, but he could not help wondering where the real war was occurring.

Prince Lovaduck had obtained his odd name because he had had a Chinesian ancestor who did

love ducks, ducks in their Peking form—succulent duck skins that brought forth to him ancestral dreams of culinary ecstasy.

His ancestress, an English lady, had said "Lord Lovaduck, that fits you!" and the name had been proudly taken as a family name. Lord Lovaduck had a small ship. The ship was tiny and had a very simple and threatening name: *Anybody*.

The ship was not listed in the space register and he himself was not in the Ministry of Space Defense. The craft was attached only to the Office of Statistics and Investigation—under the listing, "vehicle"—for the Earth treasury. He had very elementary defenses. With him on the ship went one psionic girl and one chronopathic idiot essential to his final and vital maneuvers.

With him also went a monitor. The monitor, as always, sat rigid, catatonic, unthinking, unaware—except for the tape recorder of his living mind which unconsciously noted every imminent mechanical movement of the ship and was prepared to destroy Lovaduck, the chronopathic idiot, and the ship itself should they attempt to escape the authority of Earth or should they turn against Earth. The life of a monitor was a difficult one but was far better than execution for crime, its usual alternative. The monitor made no trouble. Lovaduck also had a very small collection of weapons, weapons selected with exquisite care for the atmosphere, the climate and the

precise conditions of Raumsog's planet.

He also had a psionic talent, a poor crazy little girl who wept, and whom the Lords of the Instrumentality had cruelly refused to heal, because her talents were better in unshielded form than they would have been had she been brought into the full community of mankind. She was a class-three etiological interference.

Lovaduck brought his tiny ship near the atmosphere of Raumsog's planet. He had paid good money for his captaincy to this ship and he meant to recover it. Recover it, he would, and handsomely, if he succeeded in his adventurous mission.

The Lords of the Instrumentality were the corrupt rulers of a corrupt world, but they learned to make corruption serve their civil and military ends, and they were in no mind to put up with failures. If Lovaduck failed he might as well not come back at all. No bribery could save him from this condition. No monitor could let him escape. If he succeeded, he might be almost as rich as an Old North Australian or a stroon merchant.

Lovaduck materialized his ship just long enough to hit the planet by radio. He walked across the cabin and slapped the girl. The girl became frantically excited. At the height of her excitement he slapped a helmet on her head, plugged in the ship's communication system, and flung her own

peculiar emotional psionic radiation over the entire planet.

She was a luck-changer. She succeeded: for a few moments, at every place on that planet, under the water and on it, in the sky and in the air, luck went wrong just a little. Quarrels did occur, accidents did happen, mischances moved just within the limits of sheer probability. They all occurred within the same minute. The uproar was reported just as Lovaduck moved his ship to another position. This was the most critical time of all. He dropped down into the atmosphere. He was immediately detected. Ravening weapons reached for him, weapons sharp enough to scorch the very air and to bring every living being on the planet into a condition of screaming alert.

No weapons possessed by Earth could defend against such an attack.

Lovaduck did not defend. He seized the shoulders of his chronopathic idiot. He pinched the poor defective; the idiot fled, taking the ship with him. The ship moved back three, four seconds in time to a period slightly earlier than the first detection. All the instruments on Raumsog's planet went off. There was nothing on which they could act.

Lovaduck was ready. He discharged the weapons. The weapons were not noble.

The Lords of the Instrumentality played at being chivalrous and did love money, but when life and death were at stake, they no longer cared much about

money, or credit, or even about honor. They fought like the animals of Earth's ancient past—they fought to kill. Lovaduck had discharged a combination of organic and inorganic poisons with a high dispersion rate. Seventeen million people, nine hundred and fifty thousandths of the entire population were to die within that night.

He moved to the other side of the planet, moving backward one last time, dropped a final discharge of virulent carcinogens and snapped his ship to non-space into the outer reaches of nothing, far beyond Raumsog.

Tedesco's golden ship moved serenely toward the dying planet, Raumsog's fighters closing on it. They fired—it evaded.

The fleet moved, intercommunicated, and began to surrender. The golden ship appeared once more and then it disappeared, apparently forever.

The Lord Tedesco returned to his apartments and to the current for plugging into the centers of pleasure in his brain. But as he arranged himself on the air jet his hand stopped on its mission to press the button which would start the current. He realized suddenly, that he had pleasure. The contemplation of the golden ship and of what he had accomplished—alone, deceptive, without the praise of all the worlds for his solitary daring—gave even greater pleasure than that of the electric current.

On Earth, the Lords of the Instrumentality gracefully acknowledged that the Golden Ship had destroyed all life on Raumsog's planet. Homage was paid to them by the many worlds of mankind. Lovaduck, his idiot, his little girl, and the monitor were taken to hospitals. Their minds were erased of all recollection of their accomplishments.

Lovaduck himself appeared before the Lords of the Instrumentality. He felt that he had served on the Golden Ship but he did not remember what he had done. Tears poured down his face when the Lords of the Instrumentality gave him their highest decorations and paid him much money.

Lovaduck went back to his estates wondering that his service should have been so great. He wondered, too, in the centuries of the rest of his life, how any man—such as himself—could be so tremendous a hero and never quite remember how it was accomplished.

On a very remote planet, the survivors of a Raumsog cruiser were released from internment. By special orders, direct from Earth, their memories had been dis-coordinated so that they would not reveal the pattern of defeat. An obstinate reporter kept after one spaceman. After many hours of hard drinking the survivor's answer was still the same,

"Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh! Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh!"

**THE END**

*Keith Laumer is a writer new to science fiction. In this story he displays the finesse, artistry and imagination of an old pro. Here is one of the tightest, fastest stories of interplanetary adventure in a long while:*

# GREYLORN

By KEITH LAUMER

## PROLOGUE

THE murmur of conversation around the conference table died as the World Secretary entered the room and took his place at the head of the table.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said. "I'll not detain you with formalities today. The representative of the Navy Department is waiting outside to present the case for his proposal. You all know something of the scheme; it has been heard and passed as feasible by the Advisory Group. It will now be our responsibility to make the decision. I ask that each of you in forming a conclusion remember that our present situation can only be described as desperate, and that desperate measures may be in order."

The Secretary turned and nodded to a braided admiral seated

near the door who left the room and returned a moment later with a young gray-haired Naval Officer.

"Members of the Council," said the admiral, "this is Lieutenant Commander Greylorn." All eyes followed the officer as he walked the length of the room to take the empty seat at the end of the table.

"Please proceed, Commander," said the Secretary.

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary." The Commander's voice was unhurried and low, yet it carried clearly and held authority. He began without preliminary.

"When the World Government dispatched the Scouting Forces forty-three years ago, an effort was made to contact each of the twenty-five worlds to which this government had sent Colonization parties during the Colonial

Era of the middle Twentieth Centuries. With the return of the last of the scouts early this year, we were forced to realize that no assistance would be forthcoming from that source."

The Commander turned his eyes to the world map covering the wall. With the exception of North America and a narrow strip of coastal waters, the entire map was tinted an unhealthy pink.

"The latest figures compiled by the Department of the Navy indicate that we are losing area at the rate of one square mile every twenty-one hours. The organism's faculty for developing resistance to our chemical and biological measures appears to be evolving rapidly. Analyses of atmospheric samples indicate the level of noxious content rising at a steady rate. In other words, in spite of our best efforts, we are not holding our own against the Red Tide."

A mutter ran around the table, as Members shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

"A great deal of thought has been applied to the problem of increasing our offensive ability. This in the end is still a question of manpower and raw resources. We do not have enough. Our small improvements in effectiveness have been progressively offset by increasing casualties and loss of territory. In the end, alone, we must lose."

The Commander paused, as the murmur rose and died again.

"There is however, one possibility still unexplored," he said. "And recent work done at the Polar Research Station places the possibility well within the scope of feasibility. At the time the attempt was made to establish contact with the colonics, one was omitted. It alone now remains to be sought out. I refer to the Omega Colony."

A portly Member leaned forward and burst out, "The location of the colony is unknown!"

The Secretary intervened. "Please permit the Commander to complete his remarks. There will be ample opportunity for discussion when he has finished."

"This contact was not attempted for two reasons," the Commander continued. "First, the precise location was not known; second, the distance was at least twice that of the earlier colonies. At the time, there was a feeling of optimism which seemed to make the attempt superfluous. Now the situation has changed. The possibility of contacting Omega Colony now assumes paramount importance.

"The development of which I spoke is a new application of drive principle which has given to us a greatly improved effective velocity for space propulsion. Forty years ago, the minimum elapsed time of return travel to the presumed sector within which the Omega World should lie was about a century. Today we have the techniques to construct a small scouting vessel capable of making the transit in

just over five years. We cannot hold out here for a century, perhaps; but we can manage a decade.

"As for location, we know the initial target point toward which Omega was launched. The plan was of course that a precise target should be selected by the crew after approaching the star group closely enough to permit telescopic planetary resolution and study. There is no reason why the crew of a scout could not make the same study and examination of possible targets, and with luck find the colony.

"Omega was the last colonial venture undertaken by our people, two centuries after the others. It was the best equipped and largest expedition of them all. It was not limited to one destination, little known, but had a presumably large selection of potentials from which to choose; and her planetary study facilities were extremely advanced. I have full confidence that Omega made a successful planetfall and has by now established a vigorous new society.

"Honorable Members of the Council, I submit that all the resources of this Government should be at once placed at the disposal of a task force with the assigned duty of constructing a fifty-thousand-ton scouting vessel, and conducting an exhaustive survey of a volume of space of one thousand A.U.'s centered on the so-called Omega Cluster."

The World Secretary interrupted the babble which arose

with the completion of the officer's presentation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, time is of the essence of our problem. Let's proceed at once to orderly interrogation. Mr. Klayle, lead off, please."

The portly Councillor glared at the Commander. "The undertaking you propose, sir, will require a massive diversion of our capacities from defense. That means losing ground at an increasing rate to the obscenity crawling over our planet. That same potential applied to direct offensive measures may yet turn the balance in our favor. Against this, the possibility of a scouting party stumbling over the remains of a colony the location of which is almost completely problematical, and which by analogy with all of the earlier colonial attempts has at best managed to survive as a marginal foothold, is so fantastically remote as to be inconsiderable."

The Commander listened coolly, seriously. "Mr. Councillor," he replied, "as to our defensive measures, we have passed the point of diminishing returns. We have more knowledge now than we are capable of employing against the plague. Had we not neglected the physical sciences as we have for the last two centuries, we might have developed adequate measures before we had been so far reduced in numbers and area as to be unable to produce and employ the new weapons our laboratories have

belatedly developed. Now we must be realistic; there is no hope in that direction.

"As to the location of the Omega World, our plan is based on the fact that the selection was not made at random. Our scout will proceed along the Omega course line as known to us from the observations which were carried on for almost three years after its departure. We propose to continue on that line, carrying out systematic observation of each potential sun in turn. As we detect planets, we will alter course only as necessary to satisfy ourselves as to the possibility of suitability of the planet. We can safely assume that Omega will not have bypassed any likely target. If we should have more than one prospect under consideration at any time, we shall examine them in turn. If the Omega World has developed successfully, ample evidence should be discernible at a distance."

Klayle muttered "Madness," and subsided. The angular member on his left spoke gently, "Mr. Greylorn, why, if this colonial venture has met with the success you assume, has its government not reestablished contact with the mother world during the last two centuries?"

"On that score, Mr. Councillor, we can only conjecture," the Commander said. "The outward voyage may have required as much as fifty or sixty years. After that, there must have followed

a lengthy period of development and expansion in building the new world. It is not to be expected that the pioneers would be ready to expend resources in expeditionary ventures for some time."

"I do not completely understand your apparent confidence in the ability of the hypothetical Omega culture to supply massive aid to us, even if its people should be so inclined," said a straight-backed woman member. "The time seems very short for the mastery of an alien world."

"The population development plan, Madam, provided for an increase from the original 10,000 colonists to approximately 40,000 within twenty years, after which the rate of increase would of course rapidly grow. Assuming sixty years for planetfall, the population should now number over one hundred sixty millions. Given population, all else follows."

Two hours later, the World Secretary summed up. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have the facts before us. There still exist differences in interpretation, which however will not be resolved by continued repetition. I now call for a vote on the resolution proposed by the Military Member and presented by Commander Greylorn."

There was silence in the Council Chamber as the votes were recorded and tabulated. Then the World Secretary sighed softly.

"Commander," he said, "the



Council has approved the resolution. I'm sure that there will be general agreement that you will be placed at the head of the project, since you were director of the team which developed the new drive and are also the author of the plan. I wish you the best of luck." He rose and extended his hand.

The first keel plate of the Armed Courier Vessel *Galahad* was laid thirty-two hours later.

## CHAPTER 1

I EXPECTED trouble when I left the bridge. The tension that had been building for many weeks was ready for release in violence. The ship was silent as I moved along the passageway. Oddly silent, I thought; something was brewing.

I stopped before the door of my cabin, listening; then I put my ear to the wall. I caught the faintest of sounds from within; a muffled click, voices. Someone was inside, someone attempting to be very quiet. I was not overly surprised. Sooner or later the trouble had had to come into the open. I looked up the passage, dim in the green glow of the nightlights. There was no one in sight.

I listened. There were three voices, too faint to identify. The clever thing for me to do now would be to walk back up to the bridge, and order the Provost Marshall to clear my cabin, but I had an intuitive feeling that that was not the way to handle

the situation. It would make things much simpler all around if I could push through this with as little commotion as possible.

There was no point in waiting. I took out my key and placed it soundlessly in the slot. As the door slid back I stepped briskly into the room. Kramer, the Medical Officer, and Joyce, Assistant Communications Officer, stood awkwardly, surprised. Fine, the Supply Officer, was sprawled on my bunk. He sat up quickly.

They were a choice selection. Two of them were wearing side-arms. I wondered if they were ready to use them, or if they knew just how far they were prepared to go. My task would be to keep them from finding out.

I avoided looking surprised. "Good evening, gentlemen," I said cheerfully. I stepped to the liquor cabinet, opened it, poured Scotch into a glass. "Join me in a drink?" I said.

None of them answered. I sat down. I had to move just a little faster than they did, and by holding the initiative, keep them off balance. They had counted on hearing my approach, having a few moments to get set, and using my surprise against me. I had reversed their play and taken the advantage. How long I could keep it depended on how well I played my few cards. I plunged ahead, as I saw Kramer take a breath and wrinkle his brow, about to make his pitch.

"The men need a change, a break in the monotony," I said.

"I've been considering a number of possibilities." I fixed my eyes on Fine as I talked. He sat stiffly on the edge of my bunk. Already he was regretting his boldness in presuming to rumple the Captain's bed.

"It might be a good bit of drill to set up a few live missile runs on random targets," I said. "There's also the possibility of setting up a small arms range and qualifying all hands." I switched my eyes to Kramer. Fine was sorry he'd come, and Joyce wouldn't take the initiative; Kramer was my problem. "I see you have your Mark 9, Major," I said, holding out my hand. "May I see it?" I smiled pleasantly.

I hoped I had hit him quickly and smoothly enough, before he had had time to adjust to the situation. Even for a hard operator like Kramer, it took mental preparation to openly defy his Commander, particularly in casual conversation. But possession of the weapon was more than casual. .

I looked at him, smiling, my hand held out. He wasn't ready; he pulled the pistol from its case, handed it to me.

I flipped the chamber open, glanced at the charge indicator, checked the action. "Nice weapon," I said. I laid it on the open bar at my right.

Joyce opened his mouth to speak. I cut in in the same firm snappy tone I use on the bridge. "Let me see yours, Lieutenant."

He flushed, looked at Kramer,

then passed the pistol over without a word. I took it, turned it over thoughtfully, and then rose, holding it negligently by the grip.

"Now, if you gentlemen don't mind, I have a few things to attend to." I was not smiling. I looked at Kramer with expressionless eyes. "I think we'd better keep our little chat confidential for the present. I think I can promise you action in the near future, though."

They filed out, looking as foolish as three preachers caught in a raid on a brothel. I stood without moving until the door closed. Then I let my breath out. I sat down and finished off the Scotch in one drag.

"You were lucky, boy," I said aloud. "Three gutless wonders."

I looked at the Mark 9's on the table. A blast from one of those would have burned all four of us in that enclosed room. I dumped them into a drawer and loaded my Browning 2mm. The trouble wasn't over yet, I knew. After this farce, Kramer would have to make another move to regain his prestige. I unlocked the door, and left it slightly ajar. Then I threw the main switch and stretched out on my bunk. I put the Browning needler on the little shelf near my right hand.

Perhaps I had made a mistake, I reflected, in eliminating formal discipline as far as possible in the shipboard routine. It had seemed the best course for a long cruise under the present condi-

tions. But now I had a morale situation that could explode in mutiny at the first blunder on my part.

I knew that Kramer was the focal point of the trouble. He was my senior staff officer, and carried a great deal of weight in the Officer's Mess. As a medic, he knew most of the crew better than I. I thought I knew Kramer's driving motive, too. He had always been a great success with the women. When he had volunteered for the mission he had doubtless pictured himself as quite a romantic hero, off on a noble but hopeless quest. Now, after four years in deep space, he was beginning to realize that he was getting no younger, and that at best he would have spent a decade of his prime in monastic seclusion. He wanted to go back now, and salvage what he could.

It was incredible to me that this movement could have gathered followers, but I had to face the fact; my crew almost to a man had given up the search before it was well begun. I had heard the first rumors only a few weeks before, but the idea had spread through the crew like wildfire. Now, I couldn't afford drastic action, or risk forcing a blowup by arresting ringleaders. I had to baby the situation along with an easy hand and hope for good news from the Survey Section. A likely find now would save us.

There was still every reason to hope for success in our search.

To date all had gone according to plan. We had followed the route of Omega as far as it had been charted, and then gone on, studying the stars ahead for evidence of planets. We had made our first finds early in the fourth year of the voyage. It had been a long tedious time since then of study and observation, eliminating one world after another as too massive, too cold, too close to a blazing primary, too small to hold an atmosphere. In all we had discovered twelve planets, of four suns. Only one had looked good enough for close observation. We had moved in to televideo range before realizing it was an all-sea world.

Now we had five new main-sequence suns ahead within six months' range. I hoped for a confirmation on a planet at any time. To turn back now to a world that had pinned its last hopes on our success was unthinkable, yet this was Kramer's plan, and that of his followers. They would not prevail while I lived. Still it was not my plan to be a party to our failure through martyrdom. I intended to stay alive and carry through to success. I dozed lightly and waited.

I awoke when they tried the door. It had swung open a few inches at the touch of the one who had tried it, not expecting it to be unlatched. It stood ajar now, the pale light from the hall shining on the floor. No one entered. Kramer was still fum-

bling, unsure of himself. At every surprise with which I presented him, he was paralyzed, expecting a trap. Several minutes passed in tense silence; then the door swung wider.

"I'll be forced to kill the first man who enters this room," I said in a steady voice. I hadn't picked up the gun.

I heard urgent whispers in the hall. Then a hand reached in behind the shelter of the door and flipped the light switch. Nothing happened, since I had opened the main switch. It was only a small discomfiture, but it had the effect of interfering with their plan of action, such as it was. These men were being pushed along by Kramer, without a clearly thought out plan. They hardly knew how to go about defying lawful authority.

I called out, "I suggest you call this nonsense off now, and go back to your quarters, men. I don't know who is involved in this, yet. You can get away clean if you leave quietly, now, before you've made a serious mistake."

I hoped it would work. This little adventure, abortive though it was, might serve to let off steam. The men would have something to talk about for a few precious days. I picked up the needler and waited. If the bluff failed, I would have to kill someone.

Distantly I heard a metallic clatter. Moments later a tremor rattled the objects on the shelf, followed a few seconds later by a heavy shuddering. Papers

slid from my desk, fluttered across the floor. The whiskey bottle toppled, rolled to the far wall. I felt dizzy, as my bunk seemed to tilt under me. I reached for the intercom key and flipped it.

"Taylor," I said, "this is the Captain. What's the report?"

There was a momentary delay before the answer came. "Captain, we've taken a meteor strike aft, apparently a metallic body. It must have hit us a tremendous wallop because it's set up a rotation. I've called out Damage Control."

"Good work, Taylor," I said. I keyed for Stores; the object must have hit about there. "This is the Captain," I said. "Any damage there?"

I got a hum of background noise, then a too-close transmission. "Uh, Cap'n, we got a hole in the aft bulkhead here. I slapped a seat pad over it. Man, that coulda killed somebody."

I flipped off the intercom and started aft at a run. My visitors had evaporated. In the passage men stood, milled, called questions. I keyed my mike as I ran. "Taylor, order all hands to emergency stations."

It was difficult running, since the floors had assumed an apparent tilt. Loose gear was rolling and sliding along underfoot, propelled forward by centrifugal force. Aft of Stores, I heard the whistle of escaping air and high pressure gasses from ruptured lines. Vapor clouds fogged the

air. I called for floodlights for the whole sector.

Clay appeared out of the fog with his damage control crew. "Sir," he said, "it's punctured inner and outer shells in two places, and fragments have riddled the whole sector. There are at least three men dead, and two hurt."

"Taylor," I called, "let's have another damage control crew back here on the triple. Get the medics back here, too." Clay and his men put on masks and moved off. I borrowed one from a man standing by and followed. The large exit puncture was in the forward cargo lock. The room was sealed off, limiting the air loss.

"Clay," I said, "pass this up for the moment and get that entry puncture sealed. I'll put the extra crew in suits to handle this."

I moved back into clear air and called for reports from all sections. The worst of the damage was in the auxiliary power control room, where communication and power lines were slashed and the panel cut up. The danger of serious damage to essential equipment had been very close, but we had been lucky. This was the first instance I had heard of of encountering an object at hyper light speed.

It was astonishing how this threat to our safety cleared the air. The men went about their duties more cheerfully than they had for months, and Kramer was

conspicuous by his subdued air. The emergency had reestablished at least for the time the normal discipline; the men still relied on the Captain in trouble.

Damage control crews worked steadily for the next seventy-two hours, replacing wiring, welding, and testing. Power Section jockeyed endlessly, correcting air motions. Meanwhile, I checked almost hourly with Survey Section, hoping for good news to consolidate the improved morale situation.

It was on Sunday morning, just after dawn relief that Lt. Taylor came up to the bridge looking sick.

"Sir," he said, "we took more damage than we knew with that meteor strike." He stopped and swallowed hard.

"What have you got, Lieutenant?" I said.

"We missed a piece. It must have gone off on a tangent through stores into the cooler. Clipped the collant line, and let warm air in. All the fresh frozen stuff is contaminated and rotten." He gagged. "I got a whiff of it, sir. Excuse me." He rushed away.

This was calamity.

We didn't carry much in the way of fresh natural food; but what we had was vital. It was a bulky, delicate cargo to handle, but the chemists hadn't yet come up with synthetics to fill all the dietary needs of man. We could get by fine for a long time on vitamin tablets and concentrates; but there were nutrition-

al elements that you couldn't get that way. Hydroponics didn't help; we had to have a few ounces of fresh meat and vegetables grown in sunlight every week, or start to die within months.

I knew that Kramer wouldn't let this chance pass. As Medical Officer he would be well within his rights in calling to my attention the fact that our health would soon begin to suffer. I felt sure he would do so as loudly and publicly as possible at the first opportunity.

My best move was to beat him to the punch by making a general announcement, giving the facts in the best possible light. That might take some of the sting out of anything Kramer said later.

I gave it to them, short and to the point. "Men, we've just suffered a serious loss. All the fresh frozen stores are gone. That doesn't mean we'll be going on short rations; there are plenty of concentrates and vitamins aboard. But it does mean we're going to be suffering from deficiencies in our diet.

"We didn't come out here on a pleasure cruise; we're on a mission that leaves no room for failure. This is just one more fact for us to face. Now let's get on with the job."

I walked into the wardroom, drew a cup of near-coffee, and sat down. The screen showed a beach with booming surf. The sound track picked up the crash

and hiss of the breakers. Considering the red plague that now covered the scene, I thought it was a poor choice. I dialed for a high view of rolling farmland.

Mannion sat at a table across the room with Kirschenbaum. They were hunched over their cups, not talking. I wondered where they stood. Mannion, Communications Officer, was neurotic, but an old Armed Force man. Discipline meant a lot to him. Kirschenbaum, Power Chief, was a joker, with cold eyes, and smarter than he seemed. The question was whether he was smart enough to realize the stupidity of retreat now.

Kramer walked in, not wasting any time. He saw me and came over. He stopped a few feet from the table, and said loudly, "Captain, I'd like to know your plans, now that the possibility of continuing is out."

I sipped my near-coffee and looked at the rolling farmland. I didn't answer him. If I could get him mad, I could take him at his game.

Kramer turned red. He didn't like being ignored. The two at the other table were watching.

"Captain," Kramer said loudly. "As Medical Officer I have to know what measures you're taking to protect the health of the men."

This was a little better. He was on the defensive now; explaining why he had a right to question his Commander. I wanted him a little hotter though.

I looked up at him. "Kramer,"

I said in a clear, not too loud voice, "you're on watch. I don't want to find you hanging around the wardroom making light chit-chat until you're properly relieved from duty." I went back to my near-coffee and the farmland. A river was in view now, and beyond it distant mountains.

Kramer was furious. "Joyce has relieved me, Captain," he said, controlling his voice with an effort. "I felt I'd better take this matter up with you as soon as possible, since it affects the health of every man aboard." He was trying to keep cool, in command of himself.

"I haven't authorized any changes in the duty roster, Major," I said mildly. "Report to your post." I was riding the habit of discipline now, as far as it would carry me. I hoped that disobedience to a direct order, solidly based on regulations, was a little too big a jump for Kramer at the moment. Tomorrow it might be different. But it was essential that I break up the scene he was staging.

He wilted. "I'll see you at 1700 in the chart room, Kramer," I said as he turned away. Mannion and Kireschenbaum looked at each other, then finished their near-coffee hurriedly and left. I hoped their version of the incident would help deflate Kramer's standing among the malcontents.

I left the wardroom and took the lift up to the bridge and checked with Clay and his survey team.

"I think I've spotted a slight

perturbation in Delta 3, Captain," Clay said. "I'm not sure, we're still pretty far out."

"All right, Clay," I said. "Stay with it."

Clay was one of my more dependable men, dedicated to his work. Unfortunately, he was no man of action. He would have little influence in a show-down.

I was at the Schmidt when I heard the lift open. I turned; Kramer, Fine, Taylor, and a half a dozen enlisted crew chiefs crowded out, bunched together. They were all wearing needlers. At least they'd learned that much, I thought.

Kramer moved forward. "We feel that the question of the men's welfare has to be dealt with right away, Captain," he said smoothly.

I looked at him coldly, glanced at the rest of his crew. I said nothing.

"What we're faced with is pretty grim, even if we turn back now. I can't be responsible for the results if there's any delay," Kramer said. He spoke in an arrogant tone. I looked them over, let the silence build.

"You're in charge of this menagerie?" I said, looking at Kramer. "If so, you've got thirty seconds to send them back to their kennels. We'll go into the matter of unauthorized personnel on the bridge later. As for you, Major, you can consider yourself under arrest in quarters. Now *Move*."

Kramer was ready to stare me

down, but Fine gave me a break by tugging at his sleeve. Kramer shook him loose, snarling. At that the crew chiefs faded back into the lift. Fine and Taylor hesitated, then joined them. Kramer started to shout after them, then got hold of himself. The lift moved down.

Kramer thought about going for his needler. I looked at him through narrowed eyes. He decided to rely on his mouth, as usual. He licked his lips. "All right, I'm under arrest," he said. "But as Medical Officer of this vessel it's my duty to remind you that you can't live without a certain minimum of fresh organic food. We've got to start back now." He was pale, but determined. He couldn't bear the thought of getting bald and toothless from dietary deficiency. The girls would never give him another look.

"We're going on, Kramer," I said. "As long as we have a man aboard still able to move. Teeth or no teeth."

"Deficiency disease is no joke, Captain," Kramer said. "You can get all the symptoms of leprosy, cancer and syphilis just by skipping a few necessary elements in your diet. And we're missing most of them."

"Giving me your opinions is one thing, Kramer," I said. "Mutiny is another."

Clay stood beside the main screen, wide-eyed. I couldn't send Kramer down under his guard. "Let's go, Kramer," I said. "I'm locking you up myself."

We rode down in the lift. The men who had been with Kramer stood awkwardly, silent as we stepped out into the passage. I spotted two chronic trouble-makers among them. I thought I might as well call them now as later. "Williams and Nagle," I said, "this officer is under arrest. Escort him to his quarters and lock him in." As they stepped forward hesitantly, Kramer said, "Keep your filthy hooks off me." He started down the passage.

If I could get Kramer put away before anybody else started trouble, I might be able to bluff it through. I followed him and his two sheepish guards down past the power section, and the mess. I hoped there would be no crowd there to see their hero Kramer under guard.

I was out of luck. Apparently word had gone out of Kramer's arrest, and the corridor was clogged with men. They stood unmoving as we approached. Kramer stopped.

"Clear this passage, you men," I said.

Slowly they began to move back, giving ground reluctantly.

Suddenly Kramer shouted. "That's right, you whiners and complainers, clear the way so the Captain can take me back to the missile deck and shoot me. You just want to talk about home; you haven't got the guts to do anything about it."

The moving mass halted, milled. Someone shouted, "Who's he think he is, anyway."



Kramer whirled toward me. "He thinks he's the man who's going to let you all rot alive, to save his record."

"Williams, Nagle," I said loudly, "clear this passage."

Williams started half-heartedly to shove at the men nearest him. A fist flashed out and snapped his head back. That was a mistake; Williams pulled his needler, and fired a ricochet down the passage.

"'Bout twelve a you yellowbellies git outa my way," he yelled. "I'm comin' through."

Nagle moved close to Williams, and shouted something to him. The noise drowned it. Kramer swung back to me, frantic to regain his sway over the mob.

"Once I'm out of the way, there'll be a general purge," he roared. The hubbub faded, as men turned to hear him.

"You're all marked men. He's gone mad. He won't let one of you live." Kramer had their eyes now. "Take him now," he shouted, and seized my arm to begin the action.

He'd rushed it a little. I hit him across the face with the back of my hand. No one jumped to his assistance. I drew my 2mm. "If you ever lay a hand on your Commanding Officer again, I'll burn you where you stand, Kramer."

Then a voice came from behind me. "You're not killing anybody without a trial, Captain." Joyce stood there with two of the crew chiefs, needler in

hand. Fine and Taylor were not in sight.

I pushed Kramer out of my way and walked up to Joyce.

"Hand me that weapon, Junior, butt first," I said. I looked him in the eye with all the glare I had. He stepped back a pace.

"Why don't you jump him," he called to the crowd.

The wall annunciator hummed and spoke.

"Captain Greylorn, please report to the bridge. Unidentified body on main scope."

Every man stopped in his tracks, listening. The annunciator continued. "Looks like it's decelerating, Captain."

I holstered my pistol, pushed past Joyce, and trotted for the lift. The mob behind me broke up, talking, as men under long habit ran for action stations.

Clay was operating calmly under pressure. He sat at the main screen, and studied the blip, making tiny crayon marks.

"She's too far out for a reliable scanner track, Captain," he said, "but I'm pretty sure she's braking."

If that were true, this might be the break we'd been living for. Only manned, or controlled bodies decelerated in deep space.

"How did you spot it, Clay?" I asked. Picking up a tiny mass like this was a delicate job, even when you knew its coordinates.

"Just happened to catch my eye, Captain," he said. "I always make a general check every watch of the whole forward quadrant. I noticed a blip where

I didn't remember seeing one before."

"You have quite an eye, Clay," I said. "How about getting this object in the beam."

"We're trying now, Captain," he said. "That's a mighty small field, though."

Joyce called from the radar board, "I think I'm getting an echo at 15,000, sir. It's pretty weak."

Miller, quiet and meticulous, delicately tuned the beam control. "Give me your fix, Joyce," he said. "I can't find it."

Joyce called out his figures, in seconds of arc to three places.

"You're right on it, Joyce," Miller called a minute later. "I got it. Now pray it don't get away when I boost it."

Clay stepped over behind Miller. "Take it a few mags at a time," he said calmly.

I watched Miller's screen. A tiny point near the center of the screen swelled to a spec, and jumped nearly off the screen to the left. Miller centered it again, and switched to a higher power. This time it jumped less, and resolved into two tiny dots.

Step by step the magnification was increased as ring after ring of the lens antenna was thrown into play. Each time the centering operation was more delicate. The image grew until it filled a quarter of the screen. We stared at it in fascination.

It showed up in stark silhouette, in the electronic "light" of the radar scope. Two perfect

discs, joined by a fine filament. As we watched, their relative positions slowly shifted, one moving across, half occluding the other.

As the image drifted, Miller worked with infinite care at his console to hold it on center, in sharp focus.

"Wish you'd give me an orbit on this thing, Joyce," he said, "so I could lock onto it."

"It ain't got no orbit, man," Joyce said. "I'm trackin' it, but I don't understand it. That rock is on a closing curve with us, and slowin' down fast."

"What's the velocity, Joyce?" I asked.

"Averagin' about 1,000 relative, Captain, but slowin' fast."

"All right, we'll hold our course," I said.

I keyed for a general announcement.

"This is the Captain," I said. "General Quarters. Man action stations and prepare for possible contact within one hour."

"Missile Section. Arm No. 1 Battery and stand by."

Then I added, "We don't know what we've got here, but it's not a natural body. Could be anything from a torpedo on up."

I went back to the Beam screen. The image was clear, but without detail. The two discs slowly drew apart, then closed again.

"I'd guess that movement is due to rotation of two spheres around a common center," Clay said.

"I agree with you," I said.

"Try to get me a reading on the mass of the object."

I wondered whether Kramer had been locked up as I had ordered, but at this moment it seemed unimportant. If this was, as I hoped, a contact with our colony, all our troubles were over.

The object (I hesitated to call it a ship) approached steadily, still decelerating. Now Clay picked it up on the televideo, as it paralleled our course forty-five hundred miles out.

"Captain, it's my guess the body will match speeds with us at about 200 miles, at his present rate of deceleration," Clay said.

"Hold everything you've got on him, and watch closely for anything that might be a missile," I said.

Clay worked steadily over his chart table. Finally he turned to me. "Captain, I get a figure of over a hundred million tons mass; and calibrating the scope images gives us a length of nearly two miles."

I let that sink in. I had a strong and very empty feeling that this ship, if ship it were, was not an envoy from any human colony.

The annunciator hummed and spoke. "Captain, I'm getting a very short wave transmission from a point out on the starboard bow. Does that sound like your torpedo?" It was Mannion.

"That's it, Mannion," I said. "Can you make anything of it?"

"No, sir," he answered. "I'm

taping it, so I can go to work on it."

Mannion was our language and code man. I hoped he was good.

"What does it sound like," I asked. "Tune me in."

After a moment a high hum came from the speaker. Through it I could hear harsh chopping consonants, a whining intonation. I doubted that Mannion would be able to make anything of that gargle.

Our Bogie closed steadily. At four hundred twenty-five miles he reversed relative directions, and began matching our speed, moving closer to our course. There was no doubt he planned to parallel us.

I made a brief announcement to all hands describing the status of the action. Clay worked over his televideo, trying to clear the image. I watched as the blob on the screen swelled and flickered. Suddenly it flashed into clear stark definition. Against a background of sparkling black, the twin spheres gleamed faintly in reflected starlight.

There were no visible surface features; the iodine-colored forms and their connecting shaft had an ancient and alien look.

We held our course steadily, watching the stranger maneuver. Even at this distance it looked huge.

"Captain," Clay said, "I've been making a few rough calculations. The two spheres are about 800 yards in diameter, and

at the rate the structure is rotating it's pulling about six gravities."

That settled the question of human origin of the ship. No human crew would choose to work under six gee's.

Now, paralleling us at just over two hundred miles, the giant ship spun along, at rest relative to us. It was visible now through the direct observation panel, without magnification.

I left Clay in charge on the bridge, and I went down to the Com Section.

Joyce sat at his board, reading instruments and keying controls. So he was back on the job. Mannion sat, head bent, monitoring his recorder. The room was filled with the keening staccatto of the alien transmission.

"Getting anything on video?" I asked. Joyce shook his head. "Nothing, Captain. I've checked the whole spectrum, and this is all I get. It's coming in on about a dozen different frequencies; no FM."

"Any progress, Mannion?" I said.

He took off his headset. "It's the same thing, repeated over and over, just a short phrase. I'd have better luck if they'd vary it a little."

"Try sending," I said.

Joyce tuned the clatter down to a faint clicking, and switched his transmitter on. "You're on, Captain," he said.

"This is Captain Greylorn, UNACV Galahad; kindly identi-

fy yourself." I repeated this slowly, half a dozen times. It occurred to me that this was the first known time in history a human being had addressed a non-human intelligence. The last was a guess, but I couldn't interpret our guest's purposeful maneuverings as other than intelligent.

I checked with the bridge; no change. Suddenly the clatter stopped, leaving only the carrier hum.

"Can't you tune that whine out, Joyce?" I asked.

"No, sir," he replied. "That's a very noisy transmission. Sounds like maybe their equipment is on the blink."

We listened to the hum, waiting. Then the clatter began again.

"This is different," Mannion said. "It's longer."

I went back to the bridge, and waited for the next move from the stranger, or for word from Mannion. Every half hour I transmitted a call identifying us, followed by a sample of our language. I gave them English, Russian, and Standard Interlingua. I didn't know why, but somehow I had a faint hope they might understand some of it.

I stayed on the bridge when the watch changed. I had some food sent up, and slept a few hours on the OD's bunk.

Fine replaced Kramer on his watch when it rolled around. Apparently Kramer was out of circulation. At this point I did not feel inclined to pursue the point.

We had been at General Quar-

ters for twenty-one hours when the wall annunciator hummed.

"Captain, this is Mannion. I've busted it . . ."

"I'll be right there," I said, and left at a run.

Mannion was writing as I entered ComSection. He stopped his recorder and offered me a sheet. "This is what I've got so far, Captain," he said.

I read: INVADER; THE MANCJI PRESENCE OPENS COMMUNICATIONS.

"That's a highly inflected version of early Interlingua, Captain," Mannion said. "After I taped it, I compensated it to take out the rise-and-fall tone, and then filtered out the static. There were a few sound substitutions to figure out, but I finally caught on. It still doesn't make much sense, but that's what it says."

"I wonder what we're invading," I said. "And what is the 'Mancji Presence'?"

"They just repeat that over and over," Mannion said. "They don't answer our call."

"Try translating into old Interlingua, adding their sound changes, and then feeding their own rise-and-fall routine to it," I said. "Maybe that will get a response."

I waited while Mannion worked out the message, then taped it on top of their whining tone pattern. "Put plenty of horsepower behind it," I said. "If their receivers are as shaky as their transmitter, they might not be hearing us."

We sent for five minutes, then

tuned them back in and waited. There was a long silence from their side, then they came back with a long spluttering sing-song.

Mannion worked over it for several minutes. "They must have understood us, here's what I get," he said:

THAT WHICH SWIMS IN THE  
MANCJI SEA; WE ARE AWARE  
THAT YOU HAVE THIS TRADE  
TONGUE. YOU RANGE FAR. IT  
IS OUR WHIM TO INDULGE  
YOU; WE ARE AMUSED THAT  
YOU PRESUME HERE; WE AC-  
KNOWLEDGE YOUR INSOLENT  
DEMANDS.

"It looks like we're in somebody's back yard," I said. "They acknowledge our insolent demands, but they don't answer them." I thought a moment. "Send this," I said. "We'll out-strut them:"

THE MIGHTY WARSHIP GALA-  
HAD REJECTS YOUR JURISDIC-  
TION.  
TELL US THE NATURE OF YOUR  
DISTRESS AND WE MAY  
CHOOSE TO OFFER AID.

Mannion raised an eyebrow. "That ought to rock them," he said.

"They were eager to talk to us," I said. "That means they want something, in my opinion. And all the big talk sounds like a bluff of our own is our best line."

"Why do you want to antag-

onize them, Captain?" Joyce asked. "That ship is over a thousand times the size of this can."

"Joyce, I suggest you let me forget you're around," I said.

The Mancji whine was added to my message, and it went out. Moments later this came back:

MANCJI HONOR DICTATES  
YOUR SAFE-CONDUCT; TALK IS  
WEARYING; WE FIND IT CON-  
VENIENT TO SOLICIT A TRANS-  
FER OF ELECTROSTATIC FORCE.

"What the devil does that mean?" I said. "Tell them to loosen up and explain themselves."

Mannion wrote out a straight query, and sent it. Again we waited for a reply.

It came, in a long windy paragraph stating that the Mancji found electro-static baths amusing, and that "crystalization" had drained their tanks. They wanted a flow of electrons from us to replenish their supply.

"This sounds like simple electric current they're talking about, Captain," Mannion said. "They want a battery charge."

They seem to have power to burn," I said. "Why don't they generate their own juice? Ask them; and find out where they learned Interlingua."

Mannion sent again; the reply was slow in coming back. Finally we got it:

THE MANCJI DO NOT EMPLOY  
MASSIVE GENERATION-PIECE

WHERE ACCUMULATOR-PIECE  
IS SUFFICIENT. THIS SIMPLE  
TRADE SPEECH IS OF OLD  
KNOWLEDGE. WE SELECT IT  
FROM SYMBOLS WE ARE  
PLEASED TO SENSE EMPAT-  
TERNED ON YOUR HULL.

That made some sort of sense, but I was intrigued by the reference to Interlingua as a trade language. I wanted to know where they had learned it. I couldn't help the hope I started building on the idea that this giant knew our colony, in spite of the fact that they were using an antique version of the language, predating Omega by several centuries.

I sent another query, but the reply was abrupt and told nothing except that Interlingua was of "old knowledge."

Then Mannion entered a long technical exchange, getting the details of the kind of electric power they wanted.

"We can give them what they want, no sweat, Captain," he said after half an hour's talk. "They want DC; 100 volt, 50 amp will do."

"Ask them to describe themselves," I directed. I was beginning to get an idea.

Mannion sent, got his reply. "They're molluscoid, Captain," he said. He looked shocked. "They weigh about two tons each."

"Ask them what they eat," I said.

I turned to Joyce as Mannion worked over the message. "Get

Kramer up here, on the double," I said.

Kramer came in five minutes later, looking drawn and rumpled. He stared at me sullenly.

"I'm releasing you from arrest temporarily on your own parole, Major," I said. "I want you to study the reply to our last transmission, and tell me what you can about it."

"Why me?" Kramer said. "I don't know what's going on." I didn't answer him.

There was a long tense half hour wait before Mannion copied out the reply that came in a stuttering nasal. He handed it to me.

As I had hoped, the message, after a preliminary recital of the indifference of the Mancji to biological processes of ingestion, recited a list of standard biochemical symbols.

"Can we eat this stuff?" I asked Kramer, handing him the sheet.

He studied it, and some of his accustomed swagger began to return. "I don't know what the flowery phrases are all about, but the symbols refer to common proteins, lipins, carbohydrates, vitamins, and biamins," he said. "What is this, a game?"

"All right, Mannion," I said. I was trying to hold back the excitement. "Ask them if they have fresh sources of these substances aboard."

The reply was quick; they did.

"Tell them we will exchange electric power for a supply of these foods. Tell them we want

samples of half a dozen of the natural substances."

Again Mannion coded and sent, received and translated, sent again.

"They agree, Captain," he said at last. "They want us to fire a power lead out about a mile; they'll come in close and shoot us a specimen case with a flare on it. Then we can each check the other's merchandise."

"All right," I said. "We can use a ground-service cable; rig a pilot light on it, and kick it out, as soon as they get in close."

"We'll have to splice a couple of extra lengths to it," Mannion said.

"Go to it, Mannion," I said. "And send two of your men out to make the pick-up." This wasn't a communications job, but I wanted a reliable man handling it.

I returned to the bridge and keyed for Bourdon, directed him to arm two of his penetration missiles, lock them onto the stranger, and switch over to my control. With the firing key in my hand, I stood at the televideo screen and watched for any signs of treachery. The ship moved in, came to rest filling the screen.

Mannion's men reported out. I saw the red dot of our power lead move away, then a yellow point glowed on the side of the vast iodine-colored wall looming across the screen.

Nothing else emerged from the alien ship. The red pilot drifted across the face of the sphere. Mannion reported six

thousand feet of cable out before the pilot disappeared abruptly.

"Captain," Mannion reported, "they're drawing power."

"O.K.," I said. "Let them have a sample, then shut down."

I waited, watching carefully, until Mannion reported the canister inside.

"Kramer," I said. "Run me a fast check on the samples in that container."

Kramer was recovering his swagger. "You'll have to be a little more specific," he said. "Just what kind of analysis do you have in mind? Do you want a full . . ."

"I just want to know one thing, Kramer," I said. "Can we assimilate these substances, yes or no. If you don't feel like co-operating, I'll have you lashed to your bunk, and injected with them. You claim you're a medical officer; let's see you act like one." I turned my back to him.

Mannion called. "They say the juice we fed them was 'amusing,' Captain. I guess that means it's O.K."

"I'll let you know in a few minutes how their samples pan out," I said.

Kramer took half an hour before reporting back. "I ran a simple check such as I normally use in a routine mess inspection," he began. He couldn't help trying to take the center of the stage to go into his Wise Doctor and Helpless Patient routine.

"Yes or no," I said.

"Yes, we can assimilate most

of it," he said angrily. "There were six samples. Two were gelatinous substances, non-nutritive. Three were vegetable-like, bulky and fibrous, one with a high iodine content; the other was a very normal meaty specimen."

"Which should we take?" I said. "Remember your teeth when you answer."

"The high protein, the meaty one," he said. "Marked '6'."

I keyed for Mannion. "Tell them that in return for 1,000 KWH we require 3,000 kilos of sample six," I said.

Mannion reported back. "They agreed in a hurry, Captain. They seem to feel pretty good about the deal. They want to chat, now that they've got a bargain. I'm still taping a long tirade."

"Good," I said. "Better get ready to send about six men with an auxiliary pusher to bring home the bacon. You can start feeding them the juice again."

I turned to Kramer. He was staring at the video image. "Report yourself back to arrest in quarters, Kramer," I said. "I'll take your services today into account at your court-martial."

Kramer looked up, with a nasty grin. "I don't know what kind of talking oysters you're trafficking with, but I'd laugh like hell if they vaporized your precious tub as soon as they're through with you." He walked out.

Mannion called in again from ComSection. "Here's their last, Captain," he said. "They say



we're lucky they had a good supply of this protein aboard. It's one of their most amusing foods. It's a creature they discovered in the wild state and it's very rare. The wild ones have died out, and only their domesticated herds exist."

"O.K., we're lucky," I said. "It better be good or we'll step up the amperage and burn their batteries for them."

"Here's more," Mannion said. "They say it will take a few hours to prepare the cargo. They want us to be amused."

I didn't like the delay, but it would take us about 10 hours to deliver the juice to them at the trickle rate they wanted. Since the sample was O.K., I was assuming the rest would be too. We settled down to wait.

I left Clay in charge on the bridge and made a tour of the ship. The meeting with the alien had apparently driven the mood of mutiny into the background. The men were quiet and busy. I went to my cabin and slept for a few hours.

I was awakened by a call from Clay telling me that the alien had released his cargo for us. Mannion's crew was out making the pick-up. Before they had maneuvered the bulky cylinder to the cargo hatch, the alien released our power lead.

I called Kramer and told him to meet the incoming crew and open and inspect the cargo. If it was the same as the sample, I thought, we had made a terrific

trade. Discipline would recover if the men felt we still had our luck.

Then Mannion called again. "Captain," he said excitedly, "I think there may be trouble coming. Will you come down, sir?"

"I'll go to the bridge, Mannion," I said. "Keep talking."

I tuned my speaker down low and listened to Mannion as I ran for the lift.

"They tell us to watch for a little display of Mancji power. They ran out some kind of antenna. I'm getting a loud static at the top of my short wave receptivity."

I ran the lift up and as I stepped onto the bridge I said, "Clay, stand by to fire."

As soon as the pick-up crew was reported in, I keyed course corrections to curve us off sharply from the alien. I didn't know what he had, but I liked the idea of putting space between us. My P-Missiles were still armed and locked.

Mannion called, "Captain, they say our fright is amusing, and quite justified."

I watched the televideo screen for the first sign of an attack. Suddenly the entire screen went white, then blanked. Miller, who had been at the scanner searching over the alien ship at close range, reeled out of his seat, clutching at his eyes. "My God, I'm blinded," he shouted.

Mannion called, "Captain, my receivers blew. I think every tube in the shack exploded!"

I jumped to the direct viewer.

The alien hung there, turning away from us in a leisurely curve. There was no sign of whatever had blown us off the air. I held my key, but didn't press it. I told Clay to take Miller down to Medic. He was moaning and in severe pain.

Kramer reported in from the cargo deck. The cannister was inside now, coating up with frost. I told him to wait, then sent Chilcote, my demolition man, in to open it. Maybe it was booby-trapped. I stood by at the DVP and waited for other signs of Mancjo power to hit us. The general feeling was tense.

Apparently they were satisfied with one blast of whatever it was; they were dwindling away with no further signs of life.

After half an hour of tense alertness, I ordered the missiles disarmed.

I keyed for General. "Men, this is the Captain," I said. "It looks as though our first contact with an alien race has been successfully completed. He is now at a distance of three hundred and moving off fast. Our screens are blown, but there's no real damage. And we have a supply of fresh food aboard; now let's get back to business. That colony can't be far off."

That may have been rushing it some, but if the food supply we'd gotten was a dud, we were finished anyway.

We watched the direct-view screen till the ship was lost; then followed on radar.

"It's moving right along, Cap-

tain," Joyce said, "accelerating at about two gee's."

"Good riddance," Clay said. "I don't like dealing with armed maniacs."

"They were screwballs all right," I said, "but they couldn't have happened along at a better time. I only wish we had been in a position to squeeze a few answers out of them."

"Yes, sir," Clay said. "Now that the whole thing's over, I'm beginning to think of a lot of questions myself."

The annunciator hummed. I heard what sounded like hoarse breathing. I glanced at the indicator light. It was the cargo deck mike that was open.

I keyed. "If you have a report, Chilcote, go ahead," I said.

Suddenly someone was shouting into the mike, incoherently. I caught words, cursing. Then Chilcote's voice, "Captain," he said. "Captain, please come quick." There was a loud clatter, noise, then only the hum of the mike.

"Take over, Clay," I said, and started back to the cargo deck at a dead run.

Men crowded the corridor, asking questions, milling. I forced my way through, found Kramer surrounded by men, shouting.

"Break this up, "I shouted. "Kramer, what's your report?"

Chilcote walked past me, pale as chalk. I pushed through to Kramer.

"Get hold of yourself, and

make your report, Kramer," I said. "What started this riot?"

Kramer stopped shouting, and stood looking at me, panting. The crowded men fell silent.

"I gave you a job to do, Major," I said; "opening a cargo can. Now you take it from there."

"Yeah, Captain," he said. "We got it open. No wires, no traps. We hauled the load out of the can on to the floor. It was one big frozen mass, wrapped up in some kind of netting. Then we pulled the covering off."

"All right, go ahead," I said.

"That load of fresh meat your star-born pals gave us consists of about six families of human beings; men, women, and children." Kramer was talking for the crowd now, shouting. "Those last should be pretty tender when you ration out our ounce a week, Captain."

The men milled, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, as I thrust through to the cargo lock. The door stood ajar and wisps of white vapor curled out into the passage.

I stepped through the door. It was bitter cold in the lock. Near the outer hatch the bulky canister, rimed with white frost, lay in a pool of melting ice. Before it lay the half shrouded bulk that it had contained. I walked closer.

They were frozen together into one solid mass. Kramer was right. They were as human as I. Human corpses, stripped, packed together, frozen. I pulled back

the lightly frosted covering, and studied the glazed white bodies.

Kramer called suddenly from the door. "You found your colonists, Captain. Now that your curiosity is satisfied, we can go back where we belong. Out here man is a tame variety of cattle. We're lucky they didn't know we were the same variety, or we'd be in their food lockers now ourselves. Now let's get started back. The men won't take 'no' for an answer."

I leaned closer, studying the corpses. "Come here, Kramer," I called. "I want to show you something."

"I've seen all there is to see in there," Kramer said. "We don't want to waste time; we want to change course now, right away."

I walked back to the door, and as Kramer stepped back to let me precede him out the door, I hit him in the mouth with all my strength. His head snapped back against the frosted wall. Then he fell out into the passage.

I stepped over him. "Pick this up and put it in the brig," I said. The men in the corridor fell back, muttering. As they hauled Kramer upright I stepped through them and kept going, not running but wasting no time, toward the bridge. One wrong move on my part now and all their misery and fear would break loose in a riot the first act of which would be to tear me limb from limb.

I travelled ahead of the shock. Kramer had provided the diver-

sion I had needed. Now I heard the sound of gathering violence growing behind me.

I was none too quick. A needler flashed at the end of the corridor just as the lift door closed. I heard the tiny projectile ricochet off the lift shaft.

I rode up, stepped onto the bridge and locked the lift. I keyed for Bourdon, and to my relief got a quick response. The panic hadn't penetrated to Missile Section yet.

"Bourdon, arm all batteries and lock onto that Mancji ship," I ordered. "On the triple."

I turned to Clay. "I'll take over, Clay," I said. "Alter course to intercept our late companion at two and one-half gee's."

Clay looked startled, but said only, "Aye, sir."

I keyed for a general announcement. "This is the Captain," I said. "Action station, all hands in loose acceleration harness. We're going after Big Brother. You're in action against the enemy now, and from this point on I'm remembering. You men have been having a big time letting off steam; that's over now. All sections report."

One by one the sections reported in, all but Med. and Admin. Well, I could spare them for the present. The pressure was building now, as we blasted around in a hairpin curve, our acceleration picking up fast.

I ordered Joyce to lock his radar on target, and switch over to autopilot control. Then I called Power Section.

"I'm taking over all power control from the bridge," I said. "All personnel out of the power chamber and control chamber."

The men were still under control, but that might not last long. I had to have the entire disposition of the ship's power, control, and armament under my personal direction for a few hours at least.

Missile Section reported all missiles armed and locked on target. I acknowledged and ordered the section evacuated. Then I turned to Clay and Joyce. Both were plenty nervous now; they didn't know what was brewing.

"Lieutenant Clay," I said. "Report to your quarters; Joyce, you too. I want to congratulate both of you on a soldierly performance these last few hours."

They left without protest. I was aware that they didn't want to be too closely identified with the Captain when things broke loose.

I keyed for a video check of the interior of the lift as it started back up. It was empty. I locked it up.

Now we were steady on course, and had reached our full two and a half gees. I could hardly stand under that acceleration, but I had one more job to do before I could take a break.

Feet dragging, I unlocked the lift and rode it down. I was braced for violence as I opened the lift door, but I was lucky. There was no one in the corri-

dor. I could hear shouts in the distance. I dragged myself along to Power Section and pushed inside. A quick check of control settings showed everything as I had ordered it. Back in the passage, I slammed the leaded vault door to and threw in the combination lock. Now only I could open it without blasting.

Control Section was next. It, too, was empty, all in order. I locked it, and started across to Missiles. Two men appeared at the end of the passage, having as hard a time as I was. I entered the cross corridor just in time to escape a volley of needler shots. The mutiny was in the open now, for sure.

I kept going, hearing more shouting. I was sure the men I had seen were heading for Power and Control. They'd get a surprise. I hoped I could beat them to the draw at Missiles, too.

As I came out in B corridor, twenty feet from Missiles, I saw that I had cut it a bit fine. Three men, crawling, were frantically striving against the multi-gee field to reach the door before me. Their faces were running with sweat, purple with exertion.

I had a slight lead; it was too late to make a check inside before locking up. The best I could hope for was to lock the door before they reached it.

I drew my Browning and started for the door. They saw me and one reached for his needler.

"Don't try it," I called. I concentrated on the door, reached it, swung it closed, and as I threw in the lock a needler cracked. I whirled and fired. The man in the rear had stopped and aimed as the other two came on. He folded. The other two kept coming.

I was tired. I wanted a rest. "You're too late," I said. "No one but the Captain goes in there now." I stopped talking, panting. I had to rest. The two came on. I wondered why they struggled so desperately after they were beaten. My thinking was slowing down.

I suddenly realized they might be holding me for the crowd to arrive. I shuffled backwards towards the cross corridor. I barely made it. Two men on a shuttle cart whirled around the corner a hundred feet aft. I lurched into my shelter in a hail of needler fire. One of the tiny slugs stung through my calf and ricocheted down the passage.

I called to the two I had raced; "Tell your boys if they ever want to open that door, just see the Captain."

I hesitated, considering whether or not to make a general statement.

"What the hell," I decided. "They all know there's a mutiny now. It won't hurt to get in a little life-insurance."

I keyed my mike. "This is the Captain," I said. "This ship is now in a state of mutiny. I call on all loyal members of the Armed Forces to resist the mu-

tineers actively, and to support their Commander. Your ship is in action against an armed enemy. I assure you this mutiny will fail, and those who took part in it will be treated as traitors to their Service, their homes, and their own families who now rely on them.

"We are accelerating at two and one-half gravities, locked on a collision course with the Mancji ship. The mutineers cannot enter the Bridge, Power, Control, or Missiles Sections since only I have the combination. Thus they're doomed to failure.

"I am now returning to the Bridge to direct the attack and destruction of the enemy. If I fail to reach the Bridge, we will collide with the enemy in less than three hours, and our batteries will blow."

Now my problem was to make good my remark about returning to the Bridge. The shuttle had not followed me, presumably fearing ambush. I took advantage of their hesitation to cross back to corridor A at my best speed. I paused once to send a hail of needles ricocheted down the corridor behind me, and I heard a yelp from around the corner. Those needles had a fantastic velocity, and bounced around a long time before stopping.

At the corridor, I lay down on the floor for a rest and risked a quick look. A group of three men were bunched around the Control Section door, packing smash-

ite in the hairline crack around it. That wouldn't do them any good, but it did occupy their attention.

I faded back into the cross passage, and keyed the mike. I had to give them a chance.

"This is the Captain," I said. "All personnel not at their action stations are warned for the last time to report there immediately. Any man found away from his post from this point on is in open mutiny and can expect the death penalty. This is the last warning."

The men in the corridor had heard, but a glance showed they paid no attention to what they considered an idle threat. They didn't know how near I was.

I drew my needler, set it for continuous fire, pushed into the corridor, aimed, and fired. I shot to kill. All three sprawled away from the door, riddled, as the metal walls rang with the clou of needles.

I looked both ways, then rose, with effort, and went to the bodies. I recognized them as members of Kirschenbaum's Power Section crew. I keyed again as I moved on toward the lift at the end of the corridor, glancing back as I went.

"Corley, Mac Williams, and Reardon have been shot for mutiny in the face of the enemy," I said. "Let's hope they're the last to insist on my enforcing the death penalty."

Behind me, at the far end of the corridor, men appeared

again. I flattened myself in a doorway, sprayed needles toward them, and hoped for the best. I heard the singing of a swarm past me, but felt no hits. The mutineers offered a bigger target, and I thought I saw someone fall. As they all moved back out of sight, I made another break for the lift.

I was grateful they hadn't had time to organize. I kept an eye to the rear, and sent a hail of needles back every time a man showed himself. They ducked out to fire every few seconds, but not very effectively. I had an advantage over them; I was fighting for the success of the mission and for my life, with no one to look to for help; they were each one of a mob, none eager to be a target, each willing to let the other man take the risk.

I was getting pretty tired. I was grateful for the extra stamina and wind that daily calisthenics in a high-gee field had given me; without that I would have collapsed before now; but I was almost ready to drop. I had my eyes fixed on the lift door; each step, inch by inch, was an almost unbearable effort. With only a few feet to go, my knees gave; I went down on all fours. Another batch of needles sang around me, and vivid pain seared my left arm. It helped. The pain cleared my head, spurred me. I rose and stumbled against the door.

Now the combination. I fought a numbing desire to faint as I

pressed the lock control; three, five, two, five

I twisted around as I heard a sound. The shuttle was coming toward me, men lying flat on it, protected by the bumper plate. I leaned against the lift door, and loosed a stream of needles against the side of the corridor, banking them toward the shuttle. Two men rolled off the shuttle in a spatter of blood. Another screamed, and a hand waved above the bumper. I needled it.

I wondered how many were on the shuttle. It kept coming. The closer it came, the more effective my bank shots were. I wondered why it failed to return my fire. Then a hand rose in an arc and a choke bomb dropped in a short curve to the floor. It rolled to my feet, just starting to spew. I kicked it back. The shuttle stopped, backed away from the bomb. A jet of brown gas was playing from it now. I aimed my needler, and sent it spinning back farther. Then I turned to my lock.

Now a clank of metal against metal sounded behind me; from the side passage a figure in radiation armor moved out. The suit was self-powered and needle proof. I sent a concentrated blast at the head, as the figure awkwardly tottered toward me, ungainly in the multi-gee field. The needles hit, snapped the head back. The suited figure hesitated, arms spread, stepped back and fell with a thunderous

crash. I had managed to knock him off balance, maybe stun him.

I struggled to remember where I was in the code sequence; I went on, keyed the rest. I pushed; nothing. I must have lost count. I started again.

I heard the armored man coming on again. The needler trick wouldn't work twice. I kept working. I had almost completed the sequence when I felt the powered grip of the suited man on my arm. I twisted, jammed the needler against his hand, and fired. The arm flew back, and even through the suit I heard his wrist snap. My own hand was numb from the recoil. The other arm of the suit swept down and struck my wounded arm. I staggered away from the door, dazed with the pain.

I side-stepped in time to miss another ponderous blow. Under two and a half gees, the man in the suit was having a hard time, even with power assisted controls. I felt that I was fighting a machine instead of a man.

As he stepped toward me again, I aimed at his foot. A concentrated stream of needles hit, like a metallic fire hose, knocked the foot aside, toppled the man again. I staggered back to my door.

But now I realized I couldn't risk opening it; even if I got in, I couldn't keep my suited assailant from crowding in with me. Already he was up, lurching toward me. I had to draw him away from the door.

The shuttle sat unmoving. The

mob kept its distance. I wondered why no one was shooting; I guessed they had realized that if I were killed there would be no way to enter the vital control areas of the ship; they had to take me alive.

I made it past the clumsy armored man and started down the corridor toward the shuttle. I moved as slowly as I could while still eluding him. He lumbered after me. I reached the shuttle; a glance showed no one alive there. Two men lay across it. I pulled myself onto it and threw in the forward lever. The shuttle rolled smoothly past the armored man, striking him a glancing blow that sent him down again. Those falls, in the multi-gee field, were bone crushing. He didn't get up.

I reached the door again, rolled off the shuttle, and reached for the combination. I wished now I'd used a shorter one. I started again; heard a noise behind me. As I turned, a heavy weight crushed me against the door.

I was held rigid, my chest against the combination key. The pressure was cracking my ribs and still it increased. I twisted my head, gasping. The shuttle held me pinned to the door. The man I had assumed out of action was alive enough to hold the lever down with savage strength. I tried to shout, to remind him that without me to open the doors, they were powerless to save the ship. I couldn't



speak. I tasted blood in my mouth, and tried to breathe. I couldn't. I passed out.

## CHAPTER 2

I EMERGED into consciousness to find the pressure gone, but a red haze of pain remained. I lay on my back and saw men sitting on the floor around me.

A blow from somewhere made my head ring. I tried to sit up. I couldn't make it. Then Kramer was beside me, slipping a needle into my arm. He looked pretty bad himself. His face was bandaged heavily, and one eye was purple. He spoke in a muffled voice through stiff jaws. His tone was deliberate.

"This will keep you conscious enough to answer a few questions," he said. "Now you're going to give me the combinations to the locks so we can call off this suicide run; then maybe I'll doctor you up."

I didn't answer.

"The time for clamming up is over, you stupid braggard," Kramer said. He raised his fist and drove a hard punch into my chest. I guess it was his shot that kept me conscious. I couldn't breathe for a while, until Kramer gave me a few whiffs of oxygen. I wondered if he was fool enough to think I might give up my ship.

After a while my head cleared a little. I tried to say something. I got out a couple of croaks, and then found my voice.

"Kramer," I said.

He leaned over me. "I'm listening," he said.

"Take me to the lift. Leave me there alone. That's your only chance." It seemed to me like a long speech, but nothing happened. Kramer went away, came back. He showed me a large scalpel from his medical kit. "I'm going to start operating on your face. I'll make you into a museum freak. Maybe if you start talking soon enough I'll change my mind."

I could see the watch on his wrist. My mind worked very slowly. I had trouble getting any air into my lungs. We would intercept in one hour and ten minutes.

It seemed simple to me. I had to get back to the Bridge before we hit. I tried again. "We only have an hour," I said.

Kramer lost control. He jabbed the knife at my face, screeching through gritted teeth. I jerked my head aside far enough that the scalpel grated along my cheekbone instead of slashing my mouth. I hardly felt it.

"We're not dying because you were a fool," Kramer yelled. "I've taken over; I've relieved you as unfit for command. Now open up this ship or I'll slice you to ribbons." He held the scalpel under my nose in a fist trembling with fury. The chrome plated blade had a thin film of pink on it.

I got my voice going again. "I'm going to destroy the Man-cji ship," I said. "Take me to the

lift and leave me there." I tried to add a few words, but had to stop and work on breathing again for a while. Kramer disappeared.

I realized I was not fully in command of my senses. I was clamped in a padded claw. I wanted to roll over. I tried hard, and made it. I could hear Kramer talking, others answering, but it seemed too great an effort to listen to the words.

I was lying on my face now, head almost against the wall. There was a black line in front of me, a door. My head cleared a bit. It must have been Kramer's shot working on me. I turned my head and saw Kramer standing now with half a dozen others, all talking at once. Apparently Kramer's display of uncontrolled temper had the others worried. They wanted me alive. Kramer didn't like anyone criticizing him. The argument was pretty violent. There was scuffling—and shouts.

I saw that I lay about twenty feet from the lift; too far. The door before me, if I remembered the ship's layout, was a utility room, small and containing nothing but a waste disposal hopper. But it did have a bolt on the inside, like every other room on the ship.

I didn't stop to think about it; I started trying to get up. If I'd thought I would have known that at the first move from me all seven of them would land on me at once. I concentrated on getting my hands under me, to push up.

I heard a shout, and turning my head, saw Kramer swinging at someone. I went on with my project.

Hands under my chest, I raised myself a little, and got a knee up. I felt broken rib ends grating, but felt no pain, just the padded claw. Then I was weaving on all fours. I looked up, spotted the latch on the door, and put everything I had into lunging at it. My finger hit it, the door swung in, and I fell on my face; but I was half in. Another lunge and I was past the door, kicking it shut as I lay on the floor, reaching for the lock control. Just as I flipped it with an extended finger, someone hit the door from outside, a second too late.

It was dark, and I lay on my back on the floor, and felt strange short-circuited stabs of what would have been agonizing pain running through my chest and arm. I had a few minutes to rest now, before they blasted the door open.

I hated to lose like this, not because we were beaten, but because we were giving up. My poor world, no longer fair and green, had found the strength to send us out as her last hope. But somewhere out here in the loneliness and distance we had lost our courage. Success was at our fingertips, if we could have found it; instead, in panic and madness, we were destroying ourselves.

My mind wandered; I imag-

ined myself on the Bridge, half-believed I was there. I was resting on the OD bunk, and Clay was standing beside me. A long time seemed to pass. Then I remembered I was on the floor, bleeding internally, in a tiny room that would soon lose its door. But there was someone standing beside me.

I didn't feel too disappointed at being beaten; I hadn't hoped for much more than a breather, anyway. I wondered why this fellow had abandoned his action station to hide there. The door was still shut. He must have been there all along, but I hadn't seen him when I came in. He stood over me, wearing greasy overalls, and grinned down at me. He raised his hand. I was getting pretty indifferent to blows; I couldn't feel them.

The hand went up, the man straightened and held a fairly snappy salute. "Sir," he said. "Space'n first class Thomas."

I didn't feel like laughing or cheering or anything else; I just took it as it came.

"At ease, Thomas," I managed to say. "Why aren't you at your duty station?" I went spinning off somewhere after that oration.

Thomas was squatting beside me now. "Cap'n, you're hurt, ain't you? I was wonderin' why you was down here layin down in my 'Sposal station."

"A scratch," I said. I thought about it for a while. Thomas was doing something about my chest. This was Thomas' disposal station. Thomas owned it. I won-

dered if a fellow could make a living with such a small place way out here, with just an occasional tourist coming by. I wondered why I didn't send one of them for help; I needed help for some reason.

"Cap'n, I been overhaulin' my converter units, I jist come in. How long you been in here, Cap'n?" Thomas was worried about something.

I tried hard to think. I hadn't been here very long; just a few minutes. I had come here to rest. Then suddenly I was thinking clearly again.

Whatever Thomas was, he was apparently on my side, or at least neutral. He didn't seem to be aware of the mutiny. I realized that he had bound my chest tightly with strips of shirt; it felt better.

"What are you doing in here, Thomas?" I asked. "Don't you know we're in action against a hostile ship?"

Thomas looked surprised. "This here's my action station, Cap'n," he said. "I'm a Waste Recovery Technician, First Class, I keep the recovery system operatin'."

"You just stay in here?" I asked.

"No, sir," Thomas said. "I check through the whole system. We got three main disposal points and lots a little ones, an' I have to keep everything operatin'. Otherwise this ship would be in a bad way, Cap'n."

"How did you get in here?" I

asked. I looked around the small room. There was only one door, and the gray bulk of the converter unit which broke down wastes into their component elements for re-use nearly filled the tiny space.

"I come in through the duct, Cap'n," Thomas said. "I check the ducts every day. You know, Cap'n," he said shaking his head, "they's some bad laid-out ductin' in this here system. If I didn't keep after it, you'd be gettin' clogged ducts all the time. So I jist go through the system and keep her clear."

From somewhere, hope began again. "Where do these ducts lead?" I asked. I wondered how the man could ignore the mutiny going on around him.

"Well, sir, one leads to the mess; that's the big one. One leads to the wardroom, and the other one leads up to the Bridge."

My God, I thought, the Bridge.

"How big are they?" I asked. "Could I get through them?"

"Oh, sure, Cap'n," Thomas said. "You can get through 'em easy. But are you sure you feel like inspectin' with them busted ribs?"

I was beginning to realize that Thomas was not precisely a genius. "I can make it," I said.

"Cap'n," Thomas said diffidently, "it ain't none a my business, but don't you think maybe I better get the doctor for ya?"

"Thomas," I said, "maybe you don't know; there's a mutiny un-

der way aboard this ship. The doctor is leading it. I want to get to the Bridge in the worst way. Let's get started."

Thomas looked very shocked. "Cap'n, you mean you was hurt by somebody? I mean you didn't have a fall or nothin', you was beat up?" He stared at me with an expression of incredulous horror.

"That's about the size of it," I said. I managed to sit up. Thomas jumped forward and helped me to my feet. Then I saw that he was crying.

"You can count on me, Cap'n," he said. "Jist lemme know who done it, an' I'll feed 'em into my converter."

I stood leaning against the wall, waiting for my head to stop spinning. Breathing was difficult, but if I kept it shallow, I could manage. Thomas was opening a panel on the side of the converter unit.

"It's O.K. to go in Cap'n," he said. "She ain't operatin'."

The pull of the two and a half gees seemed to bother him very little. I could barely stand under it, holding on. Thomas saw my wavering step and jumped to help me. He boosted me into the chamber of the converter and pointed out an opening near the top, about twelve by twenty-four inches.

"That there one is to the Bridge, Cap'n," he said. "If you'll start in there, sir, I'll follow up."

I thrust head and shoulders

into the opening. Inside it was smooth metal, with no handholds. I clawed at it trying to get farther in. The pain stabbed at my chest.

"Cap'n, they're workin' on the door," Thomas said. "They already been at it for a little while. We better get goin'."

"You'd better give me a push, Thomas," I said. My voice echoed hollowly down the duct.

Thomas crowded into the chamber behind me then, lifting my legs and pushing. I eased into the duct. The pain was not so bad now.

"Cap'n, you gotta use a special kinda crawl to get through these here ducts," Thomas said. "You grip your hands together out in front of ya, and then bend your elbows. When your elbows jam against the side of the duct, you pull forward."

I tried it; it was slow, but it worked.

"Cap'n," Thomas said behind me. "We got about seven minutes now to get up there. I set the control on the converter to start up in ten minutes. I think we can make it O.K., and ain't nobody else comin' this way with the converter goin'. I locked the control panel so they can't shut her down."

That news spurred me on. With the converter in operation, the first step in the cycle was the evacuation of the ducts to a near-perfect vacuum. When that happened, we would die instantly with ruptured lungs; then our dead bodies would be sucked into

the chamber and broken down into useful raw materials. I hurried.

I tried to orient myself. The duct paralleled the corridor. It would continue in that direction for about fifteen feet, and would then turn upward, since the Bridge was some fifteen feet above this level. I hitched along, and felt the duct begin to trend upward.

"You'll have to get on your back here, Cap'n," Thomas said. "She widens out on the turn."

I managed to twist over. Thomas was helping me by pushing at my feet. As I reached a near-vertical position, I felt a metal rod under my hand. That was a relief; I had been expecting to have to go up the last stretch the way a mountain climber does a rock chimney, back against one wall and feet against the other.

I hauled at the rod, and found another with my other hand. Below, Thomas boosted me. I groped up and got another, then another. The remaining slight slant of the duct helped. Finally my feet were on the rods. I clung, panting. The heat in the duct was terrific. Then I went on up. That was some shot Kramer had given me.

Above I could see the end of the duct faintly in the light coming up through the open chamber door from the utility room. I remembered the location of the disposal slot on the Bridge now; it had been installed in the small

apartment containing a bunk and a tiny galley for the use of the Duty Officer during long watches on the Bridge.

I reached the top of the duct and pushed against the slot cover. It swung out easily. I could see the end of the chart table, and beyond, the dead radar screen. I reached through and heaved myself partly out. I nearly fainted at the stab from my ribs as my weight went on my chest. My head sang. The light from below suddenly went out. I heard a muffled clank; then a hum began, echoing up the duct.

"She's closed and started cyclin' the air out, Cap'n," Thomas said calmly. "We got about half a minute."

I clamped my teeth together and heaved again. Below me Thomas waited quietly. He couldn't help me now. I got my hands flat against the bulkhead and thrust. The air was whistling around my face. Papers began to swirl off the chart table. I twisted my body frantically, kicking loose from the grip of the slot, fighting the sucking pull of air. I fell to the floor inside the room, the slot cover slamming behind me. I staggered to my feet. I pried at the cover, but I couldn't open it against the vacuum. Then it budged, and Thomas' hand came through. The metal edge cut into it, blood started, but the cover was held open half an inch. I reached the chart table, almost falling over my leaden feet, seized a short permal T-square, and

levered the cover up. Once started, it went up easily. Thomas' face appeared, drawn and pale, eyes closed against the dust being whirled into his face. He got his arms through, heaved himself a little higher. I seized his arm and pulled. He scrambled through.

I knocked the T-square out of the way and the cover snapped down. Then I slid to the floor, not exactly out, but needing a break pretty bad. Thomas brought bedding from the OD bunk and made me comfortable on the floor.

"Thomas," I said, "when I think of what the security inspectors who approved the plans for this arrangement are going to say when I call this little back door to their attention, it almost makes it worth the trouble."

"Yes, sir," Thomas said. He sprawled on the deck and looked around the Bridge, staring at the unfamiliar screens, indicator dials, controls.

From where I lay, I could see the direct vision screen. I wasn't sure, but I thought the small bright object in the center of it might be our target. Thomas looked at the dead radar screen, then said, "Cap'n, that there radarscope out of action?"

"It sure is, Thomas," I said. "Our unknown friends blew the works before they left us." I was surprised that he recognized a radarscope.

"Mind if I take a look at it, Cap'n?" he said.

"Go ahead," I replied. I tried to explain the situation to Thomas. The elapsed time since we had started our pursuit was two hours and ten minutes; I wanted to close to no more than a twenty mile gap before launching my missiles; and I had better alert my interceptor missiles in case the Mancji hit first.

Thomas had the cover off the radar panel and was probing around. He pulled a blackened card out of the interior of the panel.

"Looks like they overloaded the fuse," Thomas said. "Got any spares, Cap'n?"

"Right beside you in the cabinet," I said. "How do you know your way around a radar set, Thomas?"

Thomas grinned. "I useta be a radar technician third before I got into waste disposal," he said. "I had to change specialties to sign on for this cruise."

I had an idea there'd be an opening for Thomas a little higher up when this was over.

I asked him to take a look at the televideo, too. I was beginning to realize that Thomas was not really simple; he was merely uncomplicated.

"Tues blowned here, Cap'n," he reported. "Like as if you was to set her up to high mag right near a sun; she was overloaded. I can fix her easy if we got the spares."

I didn't take time to try to figure that one out. I could feel the dizziness coming on again.

"Thomas," I called, "let me

know when we're at twenty miles from target." I wanted to tell him more, but I could feel consciousness draining away. "Then . . ." I managed, "first aid kit . . . shot . . ."

I could still hear Thomas. I was flying away, whirling, but I could hear his voice. "Cap'n, I could fire your missiles now, if you was to want me to," he was saying. I struggled to speak. "No. Wait." I hoped he heard me.

I floated a long time in a strange state between coma and consciousness. The stuff Kramer had given me was potent. It kept my mind fairly clear even when my senses were out of action. I thought about the situation aboard my ship.

I wondered what Kramer and his men were planning now, how they felt about having let me slip through their fingers. The only thing they could try now was blasting their way into the Bridge. They'd never make it. The designers of these ships were not unaware of the hazards of space life; the Bridge was an unassailable fortress. They couldn't possibly get to it.

I guessed that Kramer was having a pretty rough time of it now. He had convinced the men that we were rushing headlong to sure destruction at the hands of the all-powerful Mancji, and that their Captain was a fool. Now he was trapped with them in the panic he had helped to create. I thought that in all

probability they had torn him apart.

I wavered in and out of consciousness. It was just as well; I needed the rest. Then I heard Thomas calling me. "We're closin' now, Cap'n," he said. "Wake up, Cap'n, only twenty-three miles now."

"Okay," I said. My body had been preparing itself for this, now it was ready again. I felt the needle in my arm. That helped, too.

"Hand me the intercom, Thomas," I said. He placed the mike in my hand. I keyed for a general announcement.

"This is the Captain," I said. I tried to keep my voice as steady as possible. "We are now at a distance of twenty-one miles from the enemy. Stand by for missile launching and possible evasive action. Damage control crews on the alert." I paused for breath.

"Now we're going to take out the Mancji ship, men," I said. "All two miles of it."

I dropped the mike and groped for the firing key. Thomas handed it to me.

"Cap'n," he said, bending over me. "I notice you got the selector set for your chemical warheads. You wouldn't want me to set up pluto heads for ya, would ya, Cap'n?"

"No, thanks, Thomas," I said. "Chemical is what I want. Stand by to observe." I pressed the firing key.

Thomas was at the radarscope. "Missiles away, Cap'n. Trackin'

O.K. Looks like they'll take out the left half a that dumbbell."

I found the mike again. "Missiles homing on target," I said. "Strike in thirty-five seconds. You'll be interested to know we're employing chemical warheads. So far there is no sign of offense or defense from the enemy." I figured the news would shock a few mutineers. David wasn't even using his slingshot on Goliath. He was going after him bare-handed. I wanted to scare some kind of response out of them. I needed a few clues as to what was going on below.

I got it. Joyce's voice came from the wall annunciator. "Captain, this is Lt. Joyce reporting." He sounded scared all the way through, and desperate. "Sir, the mutiny has been successfully suppressed by the loyal members of the crew. Major Kramer is under arrest. We're prepared to go on with the search for the Omega Colony. But Sir . . ." he paused, gulping. "We ask you to change course now before launching any effective attack. We still have a chance. Maybe they won't bother with us when those firecrackers go off ."

I watched the direct vision screen. Zero second closed in. And on the screen the face of the left hand disk of the Mancji ship was lit momentarily by a brilliant spark of yellow, then another. A discoloration showed dimly against the dark metallic surface. It spread, and a faint vapor formed over it. Now tiny



specs could be seen moving away from the ship. The disk elongated, with infinite leisure, widening.

"What's happenin'? Cap'n?" Thomas asked. He was staring at the scope in fascination. "They launchin' scouts, or what?"

"Take a look here, Thomas," I said. "The ship is breaking up."

The disk was an impossibly long ellipse now, surrounded by a vast array of smaller bodies, fragments and contents of the ship. Now the stricken globe moved completely free of its companion. It rotated, presenting a crescent toward us, then wheeled farther as it receded from its twin, showing its elongation. The sphere had split wide open. Now the shattered half itself separated into two halves, and these in turn crumbled, strewing debris in a widening spiral.

"My God, Cap'n," Thomas said in awe. "That's the greatest display I ever seen. And all it took to set her off was 200 kilos a PBL. Now that's somethin'."

I keyed the mike again. "This is the Captain," I said. "I want ten four-man patrols ready to go out in fifteen minutes. The enemy ship has been put out of action and is now in a derelict condition. I want only one thing from her; one live prisoner. All Section chiefs report to me on the Bridge on the triple."

"Thomas," I said, "go down in the lift and open up for the

Chiefs. Here's the release key for the combination; you know how to operate it?"

"Sure, Cap'n; but are you sure you want to let them boys in here after the way they jumped you an' all?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but he beat me to it. "Fergit I asked ya that, Cap'n, pleasir. You ain't been wrong yet."

"It's O.K., Thomas," I said. "There won't be any more trouble."

## EPILOGUE

ON THE eve of the twentieth anniversary of Reunion Day, a throng of well-heeled celebrants filled the dining room and overflowed onto the terraces of the Star Tower Dining Room, from whose 5,700 foot height above the beaches, the Florida Keys, a hundred miles to the south, were visible on clear days.

The *Era* reporter stood beside the vast glass entry way surveying the crowd, searching for celebrities from whom he might elicit bits of color to spice the day's transmission.

At the far side of the room, surrounded by chattering admirers, stood the Ambassador from the New Terran Federation; a portly, graying, jolly ex-Naval officer. A minor actress passed at close range, looking the other way. A cabinet member stood at the bar talking earnestly to a ball player, ignoring a group of hopeful reporters and fans.

The *Era* stringer, an expe-

rienced hand, passed over the hard pressed VIP's near the center of the room and started a face-by-face check of the less gregarious diners seated at obscure tables along the sides of the room.

He was in luck; the straight-backed gray-haired figure in the dark civilian suit, sitting alone at a tiny table in an alcove, caught his eye. He moved closer, straining for a clear glimpse through the crowd. Then he was sure. He had the biggest possible catch of the day in his sights; Admiral of Fleets Frederick Greylorn.

The reporter hesitated; he was well aware of the Admiral's reputation for near-absolute silence on the subject of his already legendary cruise, the fabulous voyage of the *Galahad*. He couldn't just barge in on the Admiral and demand answers, as was usual with publicity-hungry politicians and show people. He could score the biggest story of the century today; but he had to hit him right.

You couldn't hope to snow a man like the Admiral; he wasn't somebody you could push around. You could sense the solid iron of him from here.

Nobody else had noticed the solitary diner. The *Era* man drifted closer, moving unhurriedly, thinking furiously. It was no good trying some tricky approach; his best bet was the straight-from-the-shoulder bit. No point in hesitating. He stopped beside the table.

The Admiral was looking out across the Gulf. He turned and glanced up at the reporter.

The news man looked him squarely in the eye. I'm a reporter, Admiral," he said. "Will you talk to me?"

The Admiral nodded to the seat across from him. "Sit down," he said. He glanced around the room.

The reporter caught the look. "I'll keep it light, sir," he said. "I don't want company either." That was being frank.

"You want the answers to some questions, don't you?" the Admiral said.

"Why, yes, sir," the reporter said. He started to inconspicuously key his pocket recorder, but caught himself. "May I record your remarks, Admiral?" he said. Frankness all the way.

"Go ahead," said the Admiral.

"Now, Admiral," the reporter began, "the Terran public has of course ."

"Never mind the patter, son," the Admiral said mildly. "I know what the questions are. I've read all the memoirs of the crew. They've been coming out at the rate of about two a year for some time now. I had my own reasons for not wanting to add anything to my official statement."

The Admiral poured wine into his glass. "Excuse me," he said. "Will you join me?" He signalled the waiter.

"Another wine glass, please," he said. He looked at the golden

wine in the glass, held it up to the light. "You know, the Florida wines are as good as any in the world," he said. "That's not to say the California and Ohio wines aren't good. But this Flora Pinellas is a genuine original, not an imitation Rhine; and it compares favorably with the best of the old vintages, particularly the '87."

The glass arrived and the waiter poured. The reporter had the wit to remain silent.

"The first question is usually, how did I know I could take the Mancji ship. After all, it was big, vast. It loomed over us like a mountain. The Mancji themselves weighed almost two tons each; they liked six gee gravity. They blasted our communication off the air, just for practice. They talked big, too. We were invaders in their territory. They were amused by us. So where did I get the notion that our attack would be anything more than a joke to them? That's the big question." The Admiral shook his head.

"The answer is quite simple. In the first place, they were pulling six gees by using a primitive dumbbell configuration. The only reason for that type of layout, as students of early space vessel design can tell you, is to simplify setting up a gee field effect using centrifugal force. So they obviously had no gravity field generators.

"Then their transmission was crude. All they had was simple

old-fashioned short-range radio, and even that was noisy and erratic. And their reception was as bad. We had to use a kilowatt before they could pick it up at 200 miles. We didn't know then it was all organically generated; that they had no equipment."

The Admiral sipped his wine, frowning at the recollection. "I was pretty sure they were bluffing when I changed course and started after them. I had to hold our acceleration down to two and a half gees because I had to be able to move around the ship. And at that acceleration we gained on them. They couldn't beat us. And it wasn't because they couldn't take high gees; they liked six for comfort, you remember. No, they just didn't have the power."

The Admiral looked out the window.

"Add to that the fact that they apparently couldn't generate ordinary electric current. I admit that none of this was conclusive, but after all, if I was wrong we were sunk anyway. When Thomas told me the nature of the damage to our radar and communications systems, that was another hint. Their big display of Mancji power was just a blast of radiation right across the communication spectrum; it burned tubes and blew fuses; nothing else. We were back in operation an hour after our attack.

"The evidence was there to see, but there's something about

giant size that gets people rattled. Size alone doesn't mean a thing. It's rather like the bluff the Soviets ran on the rest of the world for a couple of decades back in the war era, just because they sprawled across half the globe. They were a giant, though it was mostly frozen desert. When the showdown came they didn't have it. They were a pushover.

"All right, the next question is why did I choose H. E. instead of going in with everything I had? That's easy, too. What I wanted was information, not revenge. I still had the heavy stuff in reserve and ready to go if I needed it, but first I had to try to take them alive. Vaporizing them wouldn't have helped our position. And I was lucky; it worked.

"The, ah, confusion below evaporated as soon as the Section chiefs got a look at the screens and realized that we had actually knocked out the Mancji. We matched speeds with the wreckage and the patrols went out to look for a piece of ship with a survivor in it. If we'd had no luck we would have tackled the other half of the ship, which was still intact and moving off fast. But we got quite a shock when we found the nature of the wreckage." The Admiral grinned.

"Of course today everybody knows all about the Mancji hive intelligence, and their evolutionary history. But we were pretty startled to find that the only

wreckage consisted of the Mancji themselves, each two-ton slug in his own hard chitin shell. Of course, a lot of the cells were ruptured by the explosions, but most of them had simply disassociated from the hive mass as it broke up. So there was no ship; just a cluster of cells like a giant bee hive, and mixed up among the slugs, the damndest collection of loot you can imagine. The odds and ends they'd stolen and tucked away in the hive during a couple hundred years of camp-following.

"The patrols brought a couple of cells alongside, and Mannion went out to try to establish contact. Sure enough, he got a very faint transmission, on the same bands as before. The cells were talking to each other in their own language. They ignored Mannion even though his transmission must have blanketed everything within several hundred miles. We eventually brought one of them into the cargo lock and started trying different wave-lengths on it. Then Kramer had the idea of planting a couple of electrodes and shooting a little juice to it. Of course, it loved the DC, but as soon as we tried AC, it gave up. So we had a long talk with it and found out everything we needed to know.

"It was a four-week run to the nearest outpost planet of the New Terran Federation, and they took me on to New Terra aboard one of their fast liaison

vessels. The rest you know. We, the home planet, were as lost to the New Terrans as they were to us. They greeted us as though we were their own ancestors come back to visit them.

"Most of my crew, for personal reasons, were released from duty there, and settled down to stay.

"The clean-up job here on Earth was a minor operation to their Navy. As I recall, the trip back was made in a little over five months, and the Red Tide was killed within four weeks of the day the task force arrived. I don't think they wasted a motion. One explosive charge per cell, of just sufficient size to disrupt the nucleus. When the critical number of cells had been killed, the rest died overnight.

"It was quite a different Earth that emerged from under the plague, though. You know it had taken over all of the land area except North America and a strip of Western Europe, and all of the sea it wanted. It was particularly concentrated over what had been the jungle areas of South America, Africa, and Asia. You must realize that in the days before the Tide, those areas were almost completely uninhabitable. You have no idea what the term Jungle really implied. When the Tide died, it disintegrated into its component molecules; and the result was that all those vast fertile Jungle lands were now beautifully levelled and completely cleared areas covered with up to twenty

feet of the richest topsoil imaginable. That was what made it possible for old Terra to become what she is today; the Federation's truck farm, and the sole source of those genuine original Terran foods that all the rest of the worlds pay such fabulous prices for.

"Strange how quickly we forget. Few people today remember how we loathed and feared the Tide when we were fighting it. Now it's dismissed as a blessing in disguise."

The Admiral paused. "Well, he said, "I think that answers the questions and gives you a bit of homespun philosophy to go with it."

"Admiral," said the reporter, "you've given the public some facts it's waited a long time to hear. Coming from you, sir, this is the greatest story that could have come out of this Reunion Day celebration. But there is one question more, if I may ask it. Can you tell me, Admiral, just how it was that you rejected what seemed to be prima facie proof of the story the Mancji told; that they were the lords of creation out there, and that humanity was nothing but a tame food animal to them?"

The Admiral sighed. "I guess it's a good question," he said. "But there was nothing supernatural about my figuring that one. I didn't suspect the full truth, of course. It never occurred to me that we were the victims of the now well-known

but still inexplicable sense of humor of the Mancji, or that they were nothing but scavengers around the edges of the Federation. The original Omega ship had met them and seen right through them.

"Well, when this hive spotted us coming in, they knew enough about New Terra to realize at once that we were strangers, coming from outside the area. It appealed to their sense of humor to have the gall to strut right out in front of us and try to put over a swindle. What a laugh for the oyster kingdom if they could sell Terrans on the idea that they were the master race. It never occurred to them that we might be anything but Terrans; Terrans who didn't know the Mancji. And they were canny enough to use an old form of Interlingua; somewhere they'd met men before.

"Then we needed food. They knew what we ate, and that was where they went too far. They had, among the flotsam in their hive, a few human bodies they had picked up from some wreck they'd come across in their travels. They had them stashed away like everything else they could lay a pseudopod on. So they stacked them the way they'd seen Terran frozen foods shipped in the past, and sent them over. Another of their little jokes.

"I suppose if you're already overwrought and eager to quit, and you've been badly scared by

the size of an alien ship, it's pretty understandable that the sight of human bodies, along with the story that they're just a convenient food supply, might seem pretty convincing. But I was already pretty dubious about the genuineness of our pals, and when I saw those bodies it was pretty plain that we were hot on the trail of Omega Colony. There was no other place humans could have come from out there. We had to find out the location from the Mancji."

"But, Admiral," said the reporter, "true enough they were humans, and presumably had some connection with the colony, but they were naked corpses stacked like cordwood. The Mancji had stated that these were slaves, or rather domesticated animals; they wouldn't have done you any good."

"Well, you see, I didn't believe that," the Admiral said. "Because it was an obvious lie. I tried to show some of the officers, but I'm afraid they weren't being too rational just then.

"I went into the locker and examined those bodies; if Kramer had looked closely, he would have seen what I did. These were no tame animals. They were civilized men."

"How could you be sure, Admiral? They had no clothing, no identifying marks, nothing. Why didn't you believe they were cattle?"

"Because," said the Admiral, "all the men had nice neat haircuts."

**THE END**

*It's amazing how much you can learn  
about absolute strangers if you just  
stop to think about the kind of an  
animal they'll put in a . . .*

# TEST ROCKET!

By JACK DOUGLAS

CAPTAIN BAIRD stood at the window of the laboratory where the thousand parts of the strange rocket lay strewn in careful order. Small groups worked slowly over the dismantled parts. The captain wanted to ask but something stopped him. Behind him Doctor Johannsen sat at his desk, his gnarled old hand tight about a whiskey bottle, the bottle the doctor always had in his desk but never brought out except when he was alone, and waited for Captain Baird to ask his question. Captain Baird turned at last.

"They are our markings?" Captain Baird asked. It was not the question. Captain Baird knew the markings of the Rocket Testing Station as well as the doctor did.

"Yes," the doctor said, "they

are our markings. Identical. But not our paint."

Captain Baird turned back to the window. Six months ago it had happened. Ten minutes after launching, the giant test rocket had been only a speck on the observation screen. Captain Baird had turned away in disgust.

"A mouse!" the captain had said, "unfortunate a mouse can't observe, build, report. My men are getting restless, Johannsen."

"When we are ready, Captain," the doctor had said.

It was twelve hours before the urgent call from Central Control brought the captain running back to the laboratory. The doctor was there before him. Professor Schultz wasted no time, he pointed to the instrument panel. "A sudden

shift, see for yourself. We'll miss Mars by a million and a quarter at least."

Two hours later the shift in course of the test rocket was apparent to all of them and so was their disappointment.

"According to the instruments the steering shifted a quarter of an inch. No reason shows up," Professor Schultz said.

"Flaw in the metal?" Doctor Johannsen said.

"How far can it go?" Captain Baird asked.

Professor Schultz shrugged. "Until the fuel runs out, which is probably as good as never, or until the landing mechanism is activated by a planet-sized body."

"Course? Did you plot it?" The doctor asked.

"Of course I did," Professor Schultz said, "as close as I can calculate it is headed for Alpha Centauri."

Captain Baird turned away. The doctor watched him.

"Perhaps you will not be quite so hasty with your men's lives in the future, Captain?" the doctor said.

Professor Schultz was spinning dials. "No contact," the professor said, "No contact at all."

That had been six months ago. Three more test rockets had been fired successfully before the urgent report came through from Alaskan Observation Post

No. 4. A rocket was coming across the Pole.

The strange rocket was tracked and escorted by atomic armed fighters all the way to the Rocket Testing Station where it cut its own motors and gently landed. In the center of a division of atomic-armed infantry the captain, the doctor, and everyone else, waited impatiently. There was an air of uneasiness.

"You're sure it's not ours?" Captain Baird asked.

The doctor laughed. "Identical, yes, but three times the size of ours."

"Perhaps one of the Asian ones?"

"No, it's our design, but too large, much too large."

Professor Schultz put their thoughts into words. "Looks like someone copied ours. Someone, somewhere. It's hard to imagine, but true nevertheless."

They waited two weeks. Nothing happened. Then a radiation-shielded team went in to examine the rocket. Two more weeks and the strange rocket was dismantled and spread over the field of the testing station. The rocket was dismantled and the station had begun to talk to itself in whispers and look at the sky.

Captain Baird stood now at the window and looked out at the dismantled rocket. He looked but his mind was not on the parts of the rocket he could see from the window.



"The materials, they're not ours?" the captain asked.

"Unknown here," the doctor said.

The captain nodded. "Those were our instruments?"

"Yes." The doctor still held the whiskey bottle in a tight grip.

"They sent them back," the captain said.

The doctor crashed the bottle hard against the desk top. "Ask it, Captain, for God's sake!!"

The captain turned to face the doctor directly. "It was a man, a full grown man."

The doctor sighed as if letting the pent-up steam of his heart escape. "Yes, it is a man. It breathes, it eats, it has all the attributes of a man. But it is not of our planet."

"Its speech                      the captain began.

"That isn't speech, Captain," the doctor broke in, breaking in sharply, "It's only sound." The doctor stopped; he examined the label of his bottle of whiskey very carefully. A good brand of whiskey. "He seems quite happy in the storeroom. You know, Captain, what puzzled me at

first? He can't read. He can't read anything, not even the instruments in that ship. In fact he shows no interest in his rocket at all."

The captain sat down now. He sat at the desk and faced the doctor. "At least *they* had the courage to send a man, not a mouse. Doctor, a man."

The doctor stared at the captain, his hand squeezing and unsqueezing on the whiskey bottle. "A man who can't read his own instruments?" The doctor laughed. "Perhaps you too have failed to see the point? Like that stupid general who sits out there waiting for the men from somewhere to invade?"

"Don't you think it's a possibility?"

The doctor nodded. "A very good possibility, Captain, but they will not be men." The doctor seemed to pause and lean forward. "That rocket, Captain, is a test rocket. A test rocket *just like ours!*"

Then the doctor picked up his whiskey bottle at last and poured two glasses.

"Perhaps a drink, Captain?"

The captain was watching the sky outside the window.

## THE END



# WIND

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

*When you have an engine with no fuel, and fuel without an engine, and a life-and-death deadline to meet, you have a problem indeed. Unless you are a stubborn Dutchman—and Jan Van Artevelde was the stubbornest Dutchman on Venus.*

JAN WILLEM van Artevelde claimed descent from William of Orange. He had no genealogy to prove it, but on Venus there was no one who could disprove it, either.

Jan Willem van Artevelde smoked a clay pipe, which only a Dutchman can do properly, because the clay bit grates on less stubborn teeth.

Jan needed all his Dutch stubbornness, and a good deal of pure physical strength besides, to maneuver the roach-flat groundcar across the tumbled terrain of Den Hoorn into the teeth of the howling gale that swept from the west. The huge wheels twisted and jolted against the rocks outside, and Jan bounced against his seat belt, wrestled the steering wheel and puffed at his *pijp*. The mild aroma of Heerenbaai-Tabak filled the airtight groundcar.

There came a new swaying that was not the roughness of the terrain. Through the thick windshield Jan saw all the ground about him buckle and heave for a second or two before it settled to rugged quiescence again. This time he was really heaved about.

Jan mentioned this to the groundcar radio.

"That's the third time in half an hour," he commented. "The place tosses like the IJsselmeer on a rough day."

"You just don't forget it *isn't* the Zuider Zee," retorted Heemskerk from the other end. "You sink there and you don't come up three times."

"Don't worry," said Jan. "I'll be back on time, with a broom at the masthead."

"This I shall want to see," chuckled Heemskerk; a logical

reaction, considering the scarcity of brooms on Venus.

Two hours earlier the two men had sat across a small table playing chess, with little indication there would be anything else to occupy their time before blast-off of the stubby gravity-boat. It would be their last chess game for many months, for Jan was a member of the Dutch colony at Oostpoort in the northern hemisphere of Venus, while Heemskerk was pilot of the G-boat from the Dutch spaceship *Vanderdecken*, scheduled to begin an Earthward orbit in a few hours.

It was near the dusk of the 485-hour Venerian day, and the Twilight Gale already had arisen, sweeping from the comparatively chill Venerian nightside into the superheated dayside. Oostpoort, established near some outcroppings that contained uranium ore, was protected from both the Dawn Gale and the Twilight Gale, for it was in a valley in the midst of a small range of mountains.

Jan had just figured out a combination by which he hoped to cheat Heemskerk out of one of his knights, when Dekker, the *burgemeester* of Oostpoort, entered the spaceport ready room.

"There's been an emergency radio message," said Dekker. "They've got a passenger for the Earthship over at Rathole."

"Rathole?" repeated Heemskerk. "What's that? I didn't know there was another colony within two thousand kilometers."

"It isn't a colony, in the sense Oostpoort is," explained Dekker. "The people are the families of a bunch of laborers left behind when the colony folded several years ago. It's about eighty kilometers away, right across the Hoorn, but they don't have any vehicles that can navigate when the wind's up."

Heemskerk pushed his short-billed cap back on his close-cropped head, leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his comfortable stomach.

"Then the passenger will have to wait for the next ship," he pronounced. "The *Vanderdecken* has to blast off in thirty hours to catch Earth at the right orbital spot, and the G-boat has to blast off in ten hours to catch the *Vanderdecken*."

"This passenger can't wait," said Dekker. "He needs to be evacuated to Earth immediately. He's suffering from the Venus Shadow."

Jan whistled softly. He had seen the effects of that disease. Dekker was right.

"Jan, you're the best driver in Oostpoort," said Dekker. "You will have to take a groundcar to Rathole and bring the fellow back."

So now Jan gripped his clay pipe between his teeth and piloted the groundcar into the teeth of the Twilight Gale.

Den Hoorn was a comparatively flat desert sweep that ran along the western side of the Oost Mountains, just over the

mountain from Oostpoort. It was a thin fault area of a planet whose crust was peculiarly subject to earthquakes, particularly at the beginning and end of each long day when temperatures of the surface rocks changed. On the other side of it lay Rathole, a little settlement that eked a precarious living from the Venerian vegetation. Jan never had seen it.

He had little difficulty driving up and over the mountain, for the Dutch settlers had carved a rough road through the ravines. But even the 2½-meter wheels of the groundcar had trouble amid the tumbled rocks of Den Hoorn. The wind hit the car in full strength here and, though the body of the groundcar was suspended from the axles, there was constant danger of its being flipped over by a gust if not handled just right.

The three earthshocks that had shaken Den Hoorn since he had been driving made his task no easier, but he was obviously lucky, at that. Often he had to detour far from his course to skirt long, deep cracks in the surface, or steep breaks where the crust had been raised or dropped several meters by past quakes.

The groundcar zig-zagged slowly westward. The tattered violet-and-indigo clouds boiled low above it, but the wind was as dry as the breath of an oven. Despite the heavy cloud cover, the afternoon was as bright as an Earth-day. The thermometer showed the outside temperature

to have dropped to 40 degrees Centigrade in the west wind, and it was still going down.

Jan reached the edge of a crack that made further progress seem impossible. A hundred meters wide, of unknown depth, it stretched out of sight in both directions. For the first time he entertained serious doubts that Den Hoorn could be crossed by land.

After a moment's hesitation, he swung the groundcar northward and raced along the edge of the chasm as fast as the car would negotiate the terrain. He looked anxiously at his watch. Nearly three hours had passed since he left Oostpoort. He had seven hours to go and he was still at least 16 kilometers from Rathole. His pipe was out, but he could not take his hands from the wheel to refill it.

He had driven at least eight kilometers before he realized that the crack was narrowing. At least as far again, the two edges came together, but not at the same level. A sheer cliff three meters high now barred his passage. He drove on.

Apparently it was the result of an old quake. He found a spot where rocks had tumbled down, making a steep, rough ramp up the break. He drove up it and turned back southwestward.

He made it just in time. He had driven less than three hundred meters when a quake more severe than any of the others struck. Suddenly behind him the

break reversed itself, so that where he had climbed up coming westward he would now have to climb a cliff of equal height returning eastward.

The ground heaved and buckled like a tempestuous sea. Rocks rolled and leaped through the air, several large ones striking the groundcar with ominous force. The car staggered forward on its giant wheels like a drunken man. The quake was so violent that at one time the vehicle was hurled several meters sideways, and almost overturned. And the wind smashed down on it unrelentingly.

The quake lasted for several minutes, during which Jan was able to make no progress at all and struggled only to keep the groundcar upright. Then, in unison, both earthquake and wind died to absolute quiescence.

Jan made use of this calm to step down on the accelerator and send the groundcar speeding forward. The terrain was easier here, nearing the western edge of Den Hoorn, and he covered several kilometers before the wind struck again, cutting his speed down considerably. He judged he must be nearing Rathole.

Not long thereafter, he rounded an outcropping of rock and it lay before him.

A wave of nostalgia swept over him. Back at Oostpoort, the power was nuclear, but this little settlement made use of the cheapest, most obviously available power source. It was dotted

with more than a dozen windmills.

Windmills! Tears came to Jan's eyes. For a moment, he was carried back to the flat lands around 's Gravenhage. For a moment he was a tow-headed, round-eyed boy again, clumping in wooden shoes along the edge of the tulip fields.

But there were no canals here. The flat land, stretching into the darkening west, was spotted with patches of cactus and leather-leaved Venerian plants. Amid the windmills, low domes protruded from the earth, indicating that the dwellings of Rathole were, appropriately, partly underground.

He drove into the place. There were no streets, as such, but there were avenues between lines of heavy chains strung to short iron posts, evidently as handholds against the wind. The savage gale piled dust and sand in drifts against the domes, then, shifting slightly, swept them clean again.

There was no one moving abroad, but just inside the community Jan found half a dozen men in a group, clinging to one of the chains and waving to him. He pulled the groundcar to a stop beside them, stuck his pipe in a pocket of his plastic venusuit, donned his helmet and got out.

The wind almost took him away before one of them grabbed him and he was able to grasp the chain himself. They

gathered around him. They were swarthy, black-eyed men, with curly hair. One of them grasped his hand.

"*Bienvenido, señor,*" said the man.

Jan recoiled and dropped the man's hand. All the Orangeman blood he claimed protested in outrage.

Spaniards! All these men were Spaniards!

Jan recovered himself at once. He had been reading too much ancient history during his leisure hours. The hot monotony of Venus was beginning to affect his brain. It had been 500 years since the Netherlands revolted against Spanish rule. A lot of water over the dam since then.

A look at the men around him, the sound of their chatter, convinced him that he need not try German or Hollandsch here. He fell back on the international language.

"Do you speak English?" he asked. The man brightened but shook his head.

"*No hablo inglés,*" he said, "*pero el médico lo habla. Venga conmigo.*"

He gestured for Jan to follow him and started off, pulling his way against the wind along the chain. Jan followed, and the other men fell in behind in single file. A hundred meters farther on, they turned, descended some steps and entered one of the half-buried domes. A gray-haired, bearded man was in the well-lighted room, apparently

the living room of a home, with a young woman.

"*El médico,*" said the man who had greeted Jan, gesturing. *Él habla inglés.*"

He went out, shutting the airlock door behind him.

"You must be the man from Oostpoort," said the bearded man, holding out his hand. "I am Doctor Sanchez. We are very grateful you have come."

"I thought for a while I wouldn't make it," said Jan ruefully, removing his venushelmet.

"This is Mrs. Murillo," said Sanchez.

The woman was a Spanish blonde, full-lipped and beautiful, with golden hair and dark, liquid eyes. She smiled at Jan.

"*Encantada de conocerlo, señor,*" she greeted him.

"Is this the patient, Doctor?" asked Jan, astonished. She looked in the best of health.

"No, the patient is in the next room," answered Sanchez.

"Well, as much as I'd like to stop for a pipe, we'd better start at once," said Jan. "It's a hard drive back, and blastoff can't be delayed."

The woman seemed to sense his meaning. She turned and called: "*Diego!*"

A boy appeared in the door, a dark-skinned, sleepy-eyed boy of about eight. He yawned. Then, catching sight of the big Dutchman, he opened his eyes wide and smiled.

The boy was healthy-looking, alert, but the mark of the Venus Shadow was on his face. There

was a faint mottling, a criss-cross of dead-white lines.

Mrs. Murillo spoke to him rapidly in Spanish and he nodded. She zipped him into a venusuit and fitted a small helmet on his head.

"Good luck, *amigo*," said Sanchez, shaking Jan's hand again.

"Thanks," replied Jan. He donned his own helmet. "I'll need it, if the trip over was any indication."

Jan and Diego made their way back down the chain to the groundcar. There was a score of men there now, and a few women. They let the pair go through, and waved farewell as Jan swung the groundcar around and headed back eastward.

It was easier driving with the wind behind him, and Jan hit a hundred kilometers an hour several times before striking the rougher ground of Den Hoorn. Now, if he could only find a way over the bluff raised by that last quake

The ground of Den Hoorn was still shivering, Jan did not realize this until he had to brake the groundcar almost to a stop at one point, because it was not shaking in severe, periodic shocks as it had earlier. It quivered constantly, like the surface of quicksand.

The ground far ahead of him had a strange color to it. Jan, watching for the cliff he had to skirt and scale, had picked up speed over some fairly even terrain, but now he slowed again, puzzled. There was something

wrong ahead. He couldn't quite figure it out.

Diego, beside him, had sat quietly so far, peering eagerly through the windshield, not saying a word. Now suddenly he cried in a high thin tenor:

"*Cuidado! Cuidado! Un abismo!*"

Jim saw it at the same time and hit the brakes so hard the groundcar would have stood on its nose had its wheels been smaller. They skidded to a stop.

The chasm that had caused him such a long detour before had widened, evidently in the big quake that had hit earlier. Now it was a canyon, half a kilometer wide. Five meters from the edge he looked out over blank space at the far wall, and could not see the bottom.

Cursing choice Dutch profanity, Jan wheeled the groundcar northward and drove along the edge of the abyss as fast as he could. He wasted half an hour before realizing that it was getting no narrower.

There was no point in going back southward. It might be a hundred kilometers long or a thousand, but he never could reach the end of it and thread the tumbled rocks of Den Hoorn to Oostpoort before the G-boat blastoff.

There was nothing to do but turn back to Rathole and see if some other way could not be found.

Jan sat in the half-buried room and enjoyed the luxury of a pipe

filled with some of Theodorus Neimeijer's mild tobacco. Before him, Dr. Sanchez sat with crossed legs, cleaning his fingernails with a scalpel. Diego's mother talked to the boy in low, liquid tones in a corner of the room.

Jan was at a loss to know how people whose technical knowledge was as skimpy as it obviously was in Rathole were able to build these semi-underground domes to resist the earth shocks that came from Den Hoorn. But this one showed no signs of stress. A religious print and a small pencil sketch of Señora Murillo, probably done by the boy, were awry on the inward-curving walls, but that was all.

Jan felt justifiably exasperated at these Spanish-speaking people.

"If some effort had been made to take the boy to Oostpoort from here, instead of calling on us to send a car, Den Hoorn could have been crossed before the crack opened," he pointed out.

"An effort was made," replied Sanchez quietly. "Perhaps you do not fully realize our position here. We have no engines except the stationary generators that give us current for our air-conditioning and our utilities. They are powered by the windmills. We do not have gasoline engines for vehicles, so our vehicles are operated by hand."

"You push them?" demanded Jan incredulously.

"No. You've seen pictures of the pump-cars that once were

used on terrestrial railroads? Ours are powered like that, but we cannot operate them when the Venerian wind is blowing. By the time I diagnosed the Venus Shadow in Diego, the wind was coming up, and we had no way to get him to Oostpoort."

"Mmm," grunted Jan. He shifted uncomfortably and looked at the pair in the corner. The blonde head was bent over the boy protectingly, and over his mother's shoulder Diego's black eyes returned Jan's glance.

"If the disease has just started, the boy could wait for the next Earth ship, couldn't he?" asked Jan.

"I said I had just diagnosed it, not that it had just started, *señor*," corrected Sanchez. "As you know, the trip to Earth takes 145 days and it can be started only when the two planets are at the right position in their orbits. Have you ever seen anyone die of the Venus Shadow?"

"Yes, I have," replied Jan in a low voice. He had seen two people die of it, and it had not been pleasant.

Medical men thought it was a deficiency disease, but they had not traced down the deficiency responsible. Treatment by vitamins, diet, antibiotics, infrared and ultraviolet rays, all were useless. The only thing that could arrest and cure the disease was removal from the dry, cloud-hung surface of Venus and return to a moist, sunny climate on Earth.

Without that treatment, once the typical mottled texture of the



skin appeared, the flesh rapidly deteriorated and fell away in chunks. The victim remained unfevered and agonizingly conscious until the degeneration reached a vital spot.

"If you have," said Sanchez, "you must realize that Diego cannot wait for a later ship, if his life is to be saved. He must get to Earth at once."

Jan puffed at the Heerenbaai-Tabak and cogitated. The place was aptly named. It was a ratty community. The boy was a dark-skinned little Spaniard—of Mexican origin, perhaps. But he was a boy, and a human being.

A thought occurred to him. From what he had seen and heard, the entire economy of Rathole could not support the tremendous expense of sending the boy across the millions of miles to Earth by spaceship.

"Who's paying his passage?" he asked. "The Dutch Central Venus Company isn't exactly a charitable institution."

"Your *Señor* Dekker said that would be taken care of," replied Sanchez.

Jan relit his pipe silently, making a mental resolution that Dekker wouldn't take care of it alone. Salaries for Venerian service were high, and many of the men at Oostpoort would contribute readily to such a cause.

"Who is Diego's father?" he asked.

He was Ramón Murillo, a very good mechanic," answered Sanchez, with a sliding sidelong

glance at Jan's face. "He has been dead for three years."

Jan grunted.

"The copters at Oostpoort can't buck this wind," he said thoughtfully, "or I'd have come in one of those in the first place instead of trying to cross Den Hoorn by land. But if you have any sort of aircraft here, it might make it downwind—if it isn't wrecked on takeoff."

"I'm afraid not," said Sanchez.

"Too bad. There's nothing we can do, then. The nearest settlement west of here is more than a thousand kilometers away, and I happen to know they have no planes, either. Just 'copters. So that's no help."

"Wait," said Sanchez, lifting the scalpel and tilting his head. "I believe there is something, though we cannot use it. This was once an American naval base, and the people here were civilian employees who refused to move north with it. There was a flying machine they used for short-range work, and one was left behind—probably with a little help from the people of the settlement. But . . ."

"What kind of machine? Copter or plane?"

"They call it a flying platform. It carries two men, I believe. But, *señor* . . ."

"I know them. I've operated them, before I left Earth. Man, you don't expect me to try to fly one of those little things in this wind? They're tricky as they can be, and the passengers are absolutely unprotected!"

"Señor, I have asked you to do nothing."

"No, you haven't," muttered Jan. "But you know I'll do it."

Sanchez looked into his face, smiling faintly and a little sadly.

"I was sure you would be willing," he said. He turned and spoke in Spanish to Mrs. Murillo.

The woman rose to her feet and came to them. As Jan arose, she looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

"Gracias," she murmured. "*Un millón de gracias.*"

She lifted his hands in hers and kissed them.

Jan disengaged himself gently, embarrassed. But it occurred to him, looking down on the bowed head of the beautiful young widow, that he might make some flying trips back over here in his leisure time. Language barriers were not impassable, and feminine companionship might cure his neurotic, history-born distaste for Spaniards, for more than one reason.

Sanchez was tugging at his elbow.

"Señor, I have been trying to tell you," he said. "It is generous and good of you, and I wanted Señora Murillo to know what a brave man you are. But have you forgotten that we have no gasoline engines here? There is no fuel for the flying platform."

The platform was in a warehouse which, like the rest of the structures in Rathole, was a half-buried dome. The platform's ring-shaped base was less than a

meter thick, standing on four metal legs. On top of it, in the center, was a railed circle that would hold two men, but would crowd them. Two small gasoline engines sat on each side of this railed circle and between them on a third side was the fuel tank. The passengers entered it on the fourth side.

The machine was dusty and spotted with rust. Jan, surrounded by Sanchez, Diego and a dozen men, inspected it thoughtfully. The letters USN\*SES were painted in white on the platform itself, and each engine bore the label "Hiller."

Jan peered over the edge of the platform at the twin ducted fans in their plastic shrouds. They appeared in good shape. Each was powered by one of the engines, transmitted to it by heavy rubber belts.

Jan sighed. It was an unhappy situation. As far as he could determine, without making tests, the engines were in perfect condition. Two perfectly good engines, and no fuel for them.

"You're sure there's no gasoline, anywhere in Rathole?" he asked Sanchez.

Sanchez smiled ruefully, as he had once before, at Jan's appellation for the community. The inhabitants' term for it was simply "*La Ciudad Nuestra*" — "Our Town." But he made no protest. He turned to one of the other men and talked rapidly for a few moments in Spanish.

"None, señor," he said, turning back to Jan. "The Americans, of

course, kept much of it when they were here, but the few things we take to Oostpoort to trade could not buy precious gasoline. We have electricity in plenty if you can power the platform with it."

Jan thought that over, trying to find a way.

"No, it wouldn't work," he said. "We could rig batteries on the platform and electric motors to turn the propellers. But batteries big enough to power it all the way to Oostpoort would be so heavy the machine couldn't lift them off the ground. If there were some way to carry a power line all the way to Oostpoort, or to broadcast the power to it. But it's a light-load machine, and must have an engine that gives it the necessary power from very little weight."

Wild schemes ran through his head. If they were on water, instead of land, he could rig up a sail. He could still rig up a sail, for a groundcar, except for the chasm out on Den Hoorn.

The groundcar! Jan straightened and snapped his fingers.

"Doctor!" he explained. "Send a couple of men to drain the rest of the fuel from my groundcar. And let's get this platform above ground and tie it down until we can get it started."

Sanchez gave rapid orders in Spanish. Two of the men left at a run, carrying five-gallon cans with them.

Three others picked up the platform and carried it up a ramp and outside. As soon as they

reached ground level, the wind hit them. They dropped the platform to the ground, where it shuddered and swayed momentarily, and two of the men fell successfully on their stomachs. The wind caught the third and somersaulted him half a dozen times before he skidded to a stop on his back with outstretched arms and legs. He turned over cautiously and crawled back to them.

Jan, his head just above ground level, surveyed the terrain. There was flat ground to the east, clear in a fairly broad alley for at least half a kilometer before any of the domes protruded up into it.

"This is as good a spot for takeoff as we'll find," he said to Sanchez.

The men put three heavy ropes on the platform's windward rail and secured it by them to the heavy chain that ran by the dome. The platform quivered and shuddered in the heavy wind, but its base was too low for it to overturn.

Shortly the two men returned with the fuel from the groundcar, struggling along the chain. Jan got above ground in a crouch, clinging to the rail of the platform, and helped them fill the fuel tank with it. He primed the carburetors and spun the engines.

Nothing happened.

He turned the engines over again. One of them coughed, and a cloud of blue smoke burst from

its exhaust, but they did not catch.

"What is the matter, *señor*?" asked Sanchez from the dome entrance.

"I don't know," replied Jan. "Maybe it's that the engines haven't been used in so long. I'm afraid I'm not a good enough mechanic to tell."

"Some of these men were good mechanics when the navy was here," said Sanchez. "Wait."

He turned and spoke to someone in the dome. One of the men of Rathole came to Jan's side and tried the engines. They refused to catch. The man made carburetor adjustments and tried again. No success.

He sniffed, took the cap from the fuel tank and stuck a finger inside. He withdrew it, wet and oily, and examined it. He turned and spoke to Sanchez.

"He says that your groundcar must have a diesel engine," Sanchez interpreted to Jan. "Is that correct?"

"Why, yes, that's true."

"He says the fuel will not work then, *señor*. He says it is low-grade fuel and the platform must have high octane gasoline."

Jan threw up his hands and went back into the dome.

"I should have known that," he said unhappily. "I would have known if I had thought of it."

"What is to be done, then?" asked Sanchez.

"There's nothing that can be done," answered Jan. "They may as well put the fuel back in my groundcar."

Sanchez called orders to the men at the platform. While they worked, Jan stared out at the furiously spinning windmills that dotted Rathole.

"There's nothing that can be done," he repeated. "We can't make the trip overland because of the chasm out there in Del Hoorn, and we can't fly the platform because we have no power for it."

Windmills. Again Jan could imagine the flat land around them as his native Holland, with the Zuider Zee sparkling to the west where here the desert stretched under darkling clouds.

Jan looked at his watch. A little more than two hours before the G-boat's blastoff time, and it couldn't wait for them. It was nearly eight hours since he had left Oostpoort, and the afternoon was getting noticeably darker.

Jan was sorry. He had done his best, but Venus had beaten him.

He looked around for Diego. The boy was not in the dome. He was outside, crouched in the lee of the dome, playing with some sticks.

Diego must know of his ailment, and why he had to go to Oostpoort. If Jan was any judge of character, Sanchez would have told him that. Whether Diego knew it was a life-or-death matter for him to be aboard the *Vanderdecken* when it blasted off for Earth, Jan did not know. But the boy was around eight years old and he was bright, and

he must realize the seriousness involved in a decision to send him all the way to Earth.

Jan felt ashamed of the exuberant foolishness which had led him to spout ancient history and claim descent from William of Orange. It had been a hobby, and artificial topic for conversation that amused him and his companions, a defense against the monotony of Venus that had begun to affect his personality perhaps a bit more than he realized. He did not dislike Spaniards; he had no reason to dislike them. They were all humans—the Spanish, the Dutch, the Germans, the Americans, even the Russians — fighting a hostile planet together. He could not understand a word Diego said when the boy spoke to him, but he liked Diego and wished desperately he could do something.

Outside, the windmills of Rathole spun merrily.

There was power, the power that lighted and air-conditioned Rathole, power in the air all around them. If he could only use it! But to turn the platform on its side and let the wind spin the propellers was pointless.

He turned to Sanchez.

"Ask the men if there are any spare parts for the platform," he said. "Some of those legs it stands on, transmission belts, spare propellers."

Sanchez asked.

"Yes," he said. "Many spare parts, but no fuel."

Jan smiled a tight smile.

"Tell them to take the engines

out," he said. "Since we have no fuel, we may as well have no engines."

Pieter Heemskerk stood by the ramp to the stubby G-boat and checked his watch. It was X minus fifteen—fifteen minutes before blastoff time.

Heemskerk wore a spacesuit. Everything was ready, except climbing aboard, closing the airlock and pressing the firing pin.

What on Venus could have happened to Van Artevelde? The last radio message they had received, more than an hour ago, had said he and the patient took off successfully in an aircraft. What sort of aircraft could he be flying that would require an hour to cover eighty kilometers, with the wind?

Heemskerk could only draw the conclusion that the aircraft had been wrecked somewhere in Den Hoorn. As a matter of fact, he knew that preparations were being made now to send a couple of groundcars out to search for it.

This, of course, would be too late to help the patient Van Artevelde was bringing, but Heemskerk had no personal interest in the patient. His worry was all for his friend. The two of them had enjoyed chess and good beer together on his last three trips to Venus, and Heemskerk hoped very sincerely that the big blond man wasn't hurt.

He glanced at his watch again. X minus twelve. In two minutes, it would be time for him to walk up the ramp into the G-boat. In

seven minutes the backward count before blastoff would start over the area loudspeakers.

Heemskerk shook his head sadly. And Van Artevelde had promised to come back triumphant, with a broom at his masthead!

It was a high thin whine borne on the wind, carrying even through the walls of his space-helmet, that attracted Heemskerk's attention and caused him to pause with his foot on the ramp. Around him, the rocket mechanics were staring up at the sky, trying to pinpoint the noise.

Heemskerk looked westward. At first he could see nothing, then there was a moving dot above the mountain, against the indigo umbrella of clouds. It grew, it swooped, it approached and became a strange little flying disc with two people standing on it and *something* sticking up from its deck in front of them.

A broom?

No. The platform hovered and began to settle nearby, and there was Van Artevelde leaning over its rail and fiddling frantically with whatever it was that stuck up on it—a weird, angled contraption of pipes and belts topped by a whirring blade. A boy stood at his shoulder and tried to help him. As the platform descended to a few meters above ground, the Dutchman slashed at the contraption, the cut ends of belts whipped out wildly and the plat-

form slid to the ground with a rush. It hit with a clatter and its two passengers tumbled prone to the ground.

"Jan!" boomed Heemskerk, forcing his voice through the helmet diaphragm and rushing over to his friend. "I was afraid you were lost!"

Jan struggled to his feet and leaned down to help the boy up.

"Here's your patient, Pieter," he said. "Hope you have a space-suit in his size."

"I can find one. And we'll have to hurry for blastoff. But, first, what happened? Even that damned thing ought to get here from Rathole faster than that."

"Had no fuel," replied Jan briefly. "My engines were all right, but I had no power to run them. So I had to pull the engines and rig up a power source."

Heemskerk stared at the platform. On its railing was rigged a tripod of battered metal pipes, atop which a big four-blade propeller spun slowly in what wind was left after it came over the western mountain. Over the edges of the platform, running from the two propellers in its base, hung a series of tattered transmission belts.

"Power source?" repeated Heemskerk. "That?"

"Certainly," replied Jan with dignity. "The power source any good Dutchman turns to in an emergency: windmill!"

THE END

# THE GALAXY PRIMES

By E. E. SMITH

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

## Synopsis Of Part One

*Two men and two women—the greatest brains of the planet Earth—set forth on mankind's strangest adventure: to see if intergalactic space-ships can be navigated and powered by the force of the human mind.*

*They are: Clee Garlock and James James, brown-haired Lola Montandon and green-haired, fiery-tempered Belle Bellamy. Each is a Gunther First—a mind capable of using the tremendous psionic powers of the Gunther Field, an electrogravitic field which raised telepathy, teleportation, telekinesis and the other functions of the mind to unparalleled heights. Many humans are capable of Gunthering at various levels. But only a handful are Operators or Prime Operators—as far above Gunther Firsts in their command of mental powers as a Gunther First is above a puppy.*

*The four Prime Operators in the starship Pleiades—despite the machinations of Alonso Ferber, Chancellor of Solar System Enterprises—lift their ship to intergalactic space. But the jump was so great they are disoriented, and must find their own way back to Earth by Gunther-charting the Cosmos.*

*Garlock, James and their girl companions feud their way through a series of adventures. On the planet Hodell, which is guarded by the monstrous four-armed Arpalones, the men fight off the advances of beautiful women who wish to have children by the Prime Operators to upgrade the race. By using their immense mental powers—which can convert mass into total energy and mind-blast enemies—the Prime Ops help defeat an attacking horde of flying saber-toothed tigers.*

*Gunther hop follows Gunther hop, but 43 planets later the Galaxy Primes have only further adventures to show for their pains. They are no nearer to finding their way back to Earth. On Planet 43 the Primes destroy all war material on a planet about to erupt into atomic war, and give the people the secret of telepathy to start them on their climb to Guntherism, and equality with other races elsewhere in the Galaxy.*

*The Primes face their next jump, still battling among themselves to thrash out the rivalries, the jealousies, the sexual attachments that their isolation and tremendous powers are breeding.*

I THINK I'll come along with you and bodyguard you, Lola," Belle said, the following morning after breakfast. "Clee's going to be seven thousand miles deep in mathematics and Jim's doing his stuff at the observatory, and I can't help either of 'em at the moment. You'd do a better job, wouldn't you, if you could concentrate on it?"

"Of course. Thanks, Belle. But remember, it's already been announced—no death. Just hands. I can't really believe that I'll be attacked, but they seem pretty sure of it."

"I'd like to separate anyone like that from his head instead of his hands, but as it is published so it will be performed."

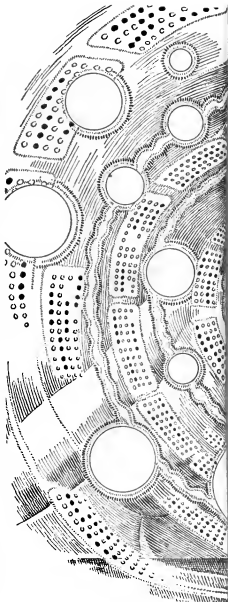
"How about wearing some kind of half-way-comfortable shoes instead of those slippers?" Garlock asked. "That could turn out to be a long, tough brawl, and your dogs'll be begging for mercy before you get back here."

"Uh-uh. Very comfortable and a perfect fit. Besides, if I have to suffer just a little bit for good appearance's sake in a matter of intergalactic amity . . ."

"A matter of showing off, you mean."

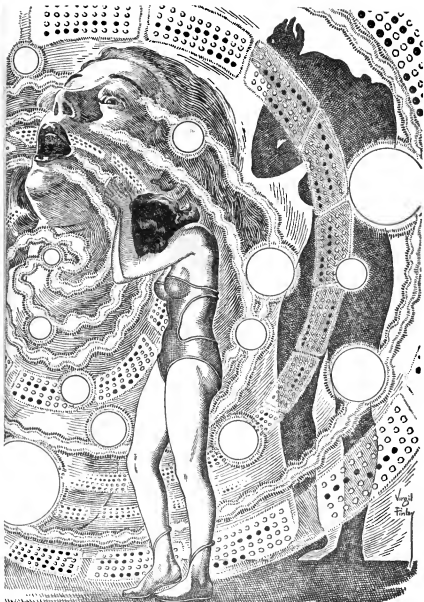
"Why, Clee!" Belle widened her eyes at him. "How you talk! But they're ready, Lola—let's go."

The two girls disappeared



The deepest Gunther block  
of a heretofore





was at last penetrated and Belle became conscious  
unknown mental alignment with the ship.

from the Main, to appear on the speakers' stand in front of the Capitol Building. President Benton was there, with his cabinet and certain other personages. General Cordeen and his staff. And many others.

"Oh, Miss Bellamy, too? I'm *very* glad you are here," Benton said, as he shook hands cordially with both.

"Thank you. I came along as bodyguard. May I meet your Secret Service Chief, please?"

"Why, of course. Miss Bellamy, may I present Mr. Avengord?"

"You have the hospital room ready? . . . Where is it, please?"

"Back of us, in the wing . . ."

"Just think of it, please, and I will follow your thought . . . Ah, yes, there it is. I hope it will not be used. You agree with General Cordeen that there will be one or more attempts at assassination?"

"I'm very much afraid so. This town is literally riddled with enemy agents, and of course we don't know all of them—especially the best ones. They know that if these meetings go through, they're sunk; so they're desperate. We've got this whole area covered like dew—we've arrested sixteen suspects already this morning—but all the advantage is theirs," Avengord finished glumly.

"Not all of it, sir," Belle smiled at him cheerfully. "You have me, and I am a Prime Operator. That is, a wielder of power of no small ability. Oh,

you are right. There is an attempt now being prepared."

While Belle had been greeting and conversing, she had also been scanning. Her range, her sensitivity, and her power were immensely greater than Lola's; were probably equal to Garlock's own. She scanned by miles against the scant yards covered by the Secret Service.

"Where?"

"Give me your thought." The Secret Service man did not know what she meant—telepathy was of course new to him—so she seized his attention and directed it to a certain window in a building a couple of miles away on a hill.

"But they couldn't, from there!"

"But they can. They have a quite efficient engine of destruction—a 'rifle' is their thought. Large, and long, with a very good telescope on it—with crosshairs. If I scan their minds more precisely you may know the weapon . . . Ah, they think of it as a 'Buford Mark Forty Anti-Aircraft Rifle'."

"A Buford! My God, they can hit any button on her clothes—get her away, quick!" He tried to jump, but could not move.

"As you were," she directed. "There was another Buford there, and another over there." She guided his thought. "Two men to each Buford. There are now six handless men in your hospital room. If you will send men to those three places you

will find the Bufords and the hands. Your surgeon will have no difficulty in matching the hands to the men. If any seek to remove either Bufords or hands before your men get there, I will de-hand them, also."

To say that the Secret Service man was flabbergasted is to put it very mildly indeed. Cordeen had told him, with much pounding on his desk and in searing, air-blueing language, what to expect—or, rather, to expect *anything*, no matter what and with no limits whatever—but he hadn't believed it then and simply could not believe it now. God-damn it, such things *couldn't* happen. And this beautiful, beautifully-stacked, half-naked woman—girl, rather, she couldn't be a day over twenty-five—even if it had been their black-browed, toplofty leader, Captain Garlock himself .

"I am twenty-three of your years old, not twenty-five," she informed him, coldly, "and I will permit no distinction of sex. In your primitive culture the women may still be allowing you men to believe in the fallacy of the superiority of the male, but know right now that I can do anything any man ever born can do and do it better."

"Oh, I'm . . . I'm sure . . . certainly . . ." Avengord's thought was incoherent.

"If you want me to work with you you had better start believing right now that there are a lot of things you don't know,"

Belle went on relentlessly. "Stop believing that just because a thing has not already happened on this primitive, backward, mudball planet of yours, it can't happen anywhere or anywhen. You do believe, however, whether you want to or not, things you see with your own eyes?"

"Yes. I can *not* be hypnotized."

"I'm very glad you believe that much." Avengord did not notice that she neither confirmed nor denied the truth of his statement. "To that end you will go now into the hospital room and see the bandaging going on. You will see and hear the news broadcast going out as I prepared it."

He went, and came back a badly shaken man.

"But they're sending it out exactly as it happened!" he protested. "They'll all scatter out so fast and so far we'll *never* catch them!"

"By no means. You see, the amputees didn't believe that they would lose their hands. Their superiors didn't believe it, either; they assured each other and their underlings that it was just capitalistic bluff and nonsense. And since they are all even more materialistic and hidebound and unbelieving than you are, they all are now highly confused—at a complete loss."

"You can say *that* again. If I, working with you and having you pounding it into my head, couldn't more than half believe it . . ."

"So they are now very fright-

ened, as well as confused, and the director of their whole spy system is now violating rule and precedent by sending out messengers to summon certain high agents to confer with him in his secret place."

"If you'll tell me where, I'll get over to my office . . ."

"No. We'll both be in your office in plenty of time. We'll watch Lola get started. It will be highly instructive for you to watch a really capable Operator at work."

President Benton had been introduced; had in turn finished introducing Lola. The crowd, many thousands strong, was cheering. Lola was stepping into the carefully marked speaker's place.

"You may disconnect these," she waved a hand at the battery of microphones, "since I do not use speech. Not only do I not know any of your various languages, but no one language would suffice. My thought will go to every person on this, your world."

"World?" the President asked in surprise. "Surely not behind the Curtains? They will jam you, I'm afraid."

"My thought, as I shall drive it, will not be stopped," Lola assured him. "Since this world has no telepathy, it has no mind-blocks and I can cover the planet as easily as one mind. Nor does it matter whether it be day or night, or whether anyone is awake or asleep. All will receive

my message. Since you wish a record, the cameras may run, although they are neither necessary nor desirable for me. Everyone will see me in his mind, much better than on the surface of any teevee tube."

"And I was going to have her address *Congress!*" the President whispered, aside, to General Cordeen.

Then Lola put her whole fine personality into a smile, directed apparently not only at each separate individual within sight, but also individually at every person on the globe; and when Brownie Montandon set out to make a production of a smile, it had the impact of a pile-driver. Then came her smooth, gently-flowing, friendly thought:

"My name, friends of this world Ormolan, is Lola Montandon. Those of you who are now looking at teevee screens can see my imaged likeness. All of you can see me very much better within your own minds.

"I am not here as an invader in any sense, but only as a citizen of the First Galaxy of this, our common universe. I have attuned my mind to each of yours in order to give you a message from the United Galaxian Societies.

"There are four of us Galaxians in this Exploration Team. As Galaxians it is our purpose here and our duty here to open your minds to certain basic truths, to be of help to you in clearing your minds of fallacies, of lies, and of undefensible

prejudices; to the end that you will more rapidly become Galaxians yourselves . . ."

"Okay. This will go on and on. That's enough to give you an idea of what a trained and polished performer can do. What do you think of *them* comfits, Chief?" Belle deliberately knocked the Secret Service man out of his Lola-induced mood.

"Huh? Oh, yes." Avengord was still groggy. "She's phenomenal—good—I don't mean goody-goody, but sincere and really . . ."

"Yeah, but don't fall in love with her. Everybody does and it doesn't do any of them a bit of good. That's her specialty and she's *very* good at it. I told you she's a smooth, smooth worker."

"You can say *that* again." Avengord did not know that he was repeating himself. "But it isn't an act. She means it and it's true."

"Of course she means it and of course it's true. Otherwise even she, with all her training, couldn't sell such a big bill of goods." Then, in answer to the man's unspoken question, "Yes, we're all different. She's the contactor, the spreader of the good old oil, the shining example of purity and sweetness and light—in short, the Greaser of the Ways. I'm a fighter, myself. Do you think she could actually have de-handed those men? Uh-uh. At the last minute she would have weakened and brought them in whole. My job in this operation is to knock hell out of the ones Lola can't convince, such as those

spies you and I are going to interview pretty quick."

"Even they ought to be convinced. I don't see how anybody could help but be."

"Uh-uh. It'll bounce off like hailstones off of a tin roof. The only thing to do to that kind of scum is kill them. If you'll give me a thought as to where your office is we'll hop over and . . ."

Belle and Avengord disappeared from the stand; and, such was Lola's hold, no one on the platform or in the throng even noticed that they were gone. They materialized in Avengord's private office; he sitting as usual at his desk, she reclining in legs-crossed ease in a big leather chair.

". . . get to work." Belle's thought had not been interrupted by any passage of time whatever. "What do you want to do first?"

"But I thought you were covering Miss Montandon?"

"I am. Like a blanket. Just as well here as anywhere. I will be, until she gets back to the *Pleides*. What first?"

"Oh. Well, since I don't know what your limits are—if you have any—you might as well do whatever you think best and I'll watch you do it."

"That's the way to talk. You're going to get a shock when you see who the Head Man is. George T. Basil."

"*Basil!* I'll say it's a shock!" Avengord steadied, frowned in concentration. "Could be, though.

He would *never* be suspected—but they're very good at that."

"Yeah. His name used to be Baslovkowitz. He was trained for years, then planted. None of this can be proved, as his record is perfect. Born citizen, highest standing in business and social circles. Unlimited entry and top security clearance. Right?"

"Right . . . and getting enough evidence, in such cases as that, is pure, unadulterated hell."

"I suppose I could kill him, after we've recorded everything he knows," Belle suggested.

"No!" He snapped. "Too many people think of us as a strong-arm squad now. Anyway, I'd rather kill him myself than wish the job off onto—you don't *like* killing, do you?"

"That's the understatement of the century. No civilized person does. In a hot fight, yes; but killing anyone who is helpless to fight back—in cold blood—ugh! It makes me sick in my stomach even to think of it."

"With the way you can read minds, we can get evidence enough to send them all to jail, and that we'll have to do."

"How about this?" Belle grinned as another solution came to mind. "From those first eight top men, we'll find out a lot of others lower down, and so on, until we have 'em all locked up here. We'll announce that exactly so many spies and agents—giving names, addresses, and facts, of course—got panicky after Lola's address. They fired up their hidden planes and flew

back behind the Curtain. Then, when we've scanned their minds and recorded everything you want, I'll pack them all, very snugly and carefully, into Sovig's private office. With the world situation what it then will be, he won't dare kill them—he simply won't know what to do when faced with it."

Avengord agreed happily. He reached out and flipped the switch of his intercom. "Miss Kimling, come in, please."

The door burst open. "Why, it is you! But you were on the rostrum just a minute . . . Oh!" She saw Belle, and backed, eyes wide, toward the door she had just entered. "*She* was there, too, and it's fifteen miles . . ."

"Steady, Fram. I'd like to present you to Prime Operator Belle Bellamy, who is cleaning out the entire Curtain organization for us."

"But how did you . . ."

"Never mind that. Teleportation. It took her half an hour to pound it into me, and we can't take time to explain anything now. I'll tell everybody everything I know as soon as I can. In the meantime, don't be surprised at anything that happens, and by that I mean *anything*. Such as solid people appearing on this carpet—on that spot right there—instantaneously. I want you to pay close attention to everything your mind receives, put your phenomenal memory into high gear, listen to everything I record, stop me any

time I'm wrong, and be sure I get everything we need."

"I don't know exactly what you're talking about, sir, but I'll try."

"Frankly, I don't, either—we'll just have to roll it as we go along. We're ready for George T. Basil now, Miss Bellamy—I hope. Don't jump, Fram."

Basil appeared and Fram jumped. She did not scream, however, and did not run out of the office. The master spy was a big, self-assured, affluent type. He had not the slightest idea of how he had been spirited out of his ultra-secret sub-basement and into this room; but he knew where he was and, after one glance at Belle, he knew why. He decided instantly what to do about it.

"This is an outrage!" he belted, hammering with his fist on Avengord's desk. "A stupid, high-handed violation of the rights . . ."

Belle silenced him and straightened him up.

"High-handed? Yes," she admitted quite seriously. "However, from the Galaxian standpoint, you have no rights at all and you are going to be extremely surprised at just how high-handed I am going to be. I am going to read your mind to its very bottom—layer by layer, like peeling an onion—and everything you know and everything you think is going down in Mr. Avengord's Big Black Book."

Belle linked all four minds together and directed the search, making sure that no item, however small, was missed. Avengord recorded every pertinent item. Fram Kimling memorized and correlated and double-checked.

Soon it was done, and Basil, shouting even louder about this last and worst violation of his rights—those of his own private mind—was led away by two men and "put away where he would keep."

"But this is a flagrant violation of law . . ." Miss Kimling began.

"You can say *that* again!" her boss gloated. "And if you only knew how tickled I am to do it, after the way they've been kicking me around!"

"But I wonder . . . are you sure we can get away with it?"

"Certainly," Belle put in. "We Galaxians are doing it, not your government or your Secret Service. We'll start you clean—but it'll be up to you to keep it clean, and that will be no easy job."

"No, it won't; but we'll do it. Come around again, say in five or six years, and see."

"You know, I might take you up on that? Maybe not this same team, but I've got a notion to tape a recommendation for a revisit, just to see how you get along. It'd be interesting."

"I wish you would. It might help, too, if everybody thought you'd come back to check. Suppose you could?"

"I've no idea, really. I'd like to, though, and I'll see what I can do. But let's get on with the job. They're all in what you call the 'tank' now. Which one do you want next?"

The work went on. That evening there was of course a reception; and then a ball. And Belle's feet did hurt when she got back to the *Pleiades*, but of course she would not admit the fact—most especially not to Garlock.

Exactly at the expiration of the stipulated seventy-two hours, the Galaxians began to destroy military atomic plants; and, shortly thereafter, the starship's crew was again ready to go.

And James rammed home the red button that would send them—all four wondered—*where?*

It turned out to be another Hodell-type world; and, even with the high-speed comparator, it took longer to check the charts than it did to make them.

The next planet was similar. So was the next, and the next. The time required for checking grew longer and longer.

"How about cutting out this checking entirely, Clee?" James asked then. "What good does it do? Even if we find a similarity, what could we do about it? We've got enough stuff now to keep a crew of astronomers busy for five years making a tank of it."

"Okay. We probably are so far away now, anyway, that the chance of finding a similarity is

vanishingly small. Keep on taking the shots, though; they'll prove, I think, that the universe is one whole hell of a lot bigger than anybody has ever thought it was. That reminds me—are you getting anywhere on that N-problem? I'm not."

"I'm getting nowhere, fast. You should have been a math prof in a grad school, Clee. You could flunk every advanced student you had with that one. Belle and I together can't feed it to Compy in such shape as to get a definite answer. We think, though, that your guess was right—if we ever stabilize anywhere it will probably be relative to Hodell, not to Tellus. But the cold fact of how far away we must be by this time just scares the pants off of me."

"You and me both, my ripe and old. We're a *long* ways from home."

Jumping went on; and, two or three planets later, they encountered an Arpalone Inspector who did not test them for compatibility with the humanity of his world.

"Do not land," the creature said, mournfully. "This world is dying, and if you leave the protection of your ship, you too will die."

"But *worlds* don't die, surely?" Garlock protested. "People, yes—but worlds?"

"Worlds die. It is the Dilipic. The humans die, too, of course, but it is the world itself that is attacked, not the people. Some



of them, in fact, will live through it."

Garlock drove his attention downward and scanned.

"You Arpalones are doing what looks like a mighty good job of fighting. Can't you win?"

"No, it is too late. It was already too late when they first appeared, two days ago. When the Dilipics strike in such small force that none of their—agents?—devices?—whatever they are?—can land against our beaming, a world can be saved; but such cases are very few."

"But this thought, 'Dilipic'?" Garlock asked, impatiently. "It is merely a symbol—it doesn't mean anything—to me, at least. What are they? Where do they come from?"

"No one knows anything about them," came the surprising answer. "Not even their physical shape—if they have any. Nor where they come from, or how they do what they do."

"They can't be very common," Garlock pondered. "We have never heard of them before."

"Fortunately, they are not," the Inspector agreed. "Scarcely one world in five hundred is ever attacked by them—this is the first Dilipic invasion I have seen."

"Oh, you Arpalones don't die with your worlds, then?" Lola asked. She was badly shaken. "But I suppose the Arpales do, of course."

"Practically all of the Arpales will die, of course. Most of us Arpalones will also die, in the

battles now going on. Those of us who survive, however, will stay aloft until the rehabilitation fleet arrives, then we will continue our regular work."

"Rehab?" Belle exclaimed. "You mean you can *restore* planets so badly ruined that all the people die?"

"Oh, yes. It is a long and difficult work, but the planet is always re-peopled."

"Let's go down," Garlock said. "I want to get all of this on tape."

They went down, over what had been one of that world's largest cities. The air, the stratosphere, and all nearby space were full of battling vessels of all shapes and sizes; ranging from the tremendous globular spaceships of the invaders down to the tiny, one-man jet-fighters of the Arpalones.

The Dilipics were using projectile weapons only—ranging in size, with the size of the vessels, from heavy machine guns up to seventy-five-millimeter quick-firing rifles. They were also launching thousands of guided missiles of fantastic speed and of tremendous explosive power.

The Arpalones were not using anything solid at all. Each defending vessel, depending upon its type and class, carried from four up to a hundred or so burnished-metal reflectors some four feet in diameter; each with a small black device at its optical center and each pouring out a tight beam of highly effective

energy. It was at these reflectors, and particularly at these tiny devices, that the small-arms fire was directed, and the marksmanship of the Dilipics was very good indeed. However, each projector was oscillating irregularly and each fighter-plane was taking evasive action; and, since a few bullet-holes in any reflector did not reduce its efficiency very much, and since the central mechanisms were so small and were moving so erratically, a good three-quarters of the Arpalonian beams were still in action.

There was no doubt at all that those beams were highly effective. Invisible for the most part, whenever one struck a Dilipic ship or plane everything in its path flared almost instantly into vapor and the beam glared incandescently, blindingly white or violet or high blue—never anything lower than blue. Almost everything material, that is; for guns, ammunition, and missiles were not affected. They did not even explode. When whatever fabric it was that supported them was blasted away, all such things simply dropped; simply fell through thousands or hundreds of thousands of feet of air to crash unheeded upon whatever happened to be below.

The invading task force was arranged in a whirling, swirling, almost cylindrical cone, more or less like an Earthly tornado. The largest vessels were high above the stratosphere; the smallest

fighters were hedge-hoppingly close to ground. Each Dilipic unit seemed madly, suicidally determined that nothing would get through that furious wall to interfere with whatever it was that was coming down from space to the ground through—along?—the relatively quiet "eye" of the pseudo-hurricane.

On the other hand, the Arpalones were madly, suicidally determined to break through that vortex wall, to get into the "eye," to wreak all possible damage there. Group after group after group of five jet-fighters each came driving in; and, occasionally, the combined blasts of all five made enough of opening in the wall so that the center fighter could get through. Once inside, each pilot stood his little, stubby-winged craft squarely on her tail, opened his projectors to absolute maximum of power and of spread, and climbed straight up the spout until he was shot down.

And the Arpalones were winning the battle. Larger and larger gaps were being opened in the vortex wall; gaps which it became increasingly difficult for the Dilipics to fill. More and more Arpalone fighters were getting inside. They were lasting longer and doing more damage all the time. The tube was growing narrower and narrower.

All four Galaxians perceived all this in seconds. Garlock weighed out and detonated a terrific matter-conversion bomb in the exact center of one of the

largest vessels of the attacking fleet. It had no effect. Then a larger one. Then another, still heavier. Finally, at over a hundred megatons equivalent, he did get results—of a sort. The invaders' guns, ammunition, and missiles were blown out of the ship and scattered outward for miles in all directions; but the structure of the Dilipic ship itself was not harmed.

Belle had been studying, analyzing, probing the things that were coming down through that hellish tube.

"Clee!" She drove a thought. "Cut out the monkey-business with those damn firecrackers of yours and look here—pure, solid force, like ball lightning or our Op field, but entirely different—see if you can analyze the stuff!"

"Alive?" Garlock asked, as he drove a probe into one of the things—they were furiously-radiating spheres some seven feet in diameter—and began to tune to it.

"I don't know—don't think so—if they are, they're a form of life that no sane human being could even imagine!"

"Let's see what they actually do," Garlock suggested, still trying to tune in with the thing, whatever it was, and still following it down.

This particular force-ball happened to hit the top of a six-story building. It was not going very fast—fifteen or twenty miles an hour—but when it struck the roof it did not even

slow down. Without any effort at all, apparently, it continued downward through the concrete and steel and glass of the building; and everything in its path became monstrously, sickeningly, revoltingly changed.

"I simply can't stand any more of this," Lola gasped. "If you don't mind, I'm going to my room, set all the Gunther blocks it has, and bury my head under a pillow."

"Go ahead, Brownie," James said. "This is too tough for *anybody* to watch. I'd do the same, except I've got to run these cameras."

Lola disappeared.

Garlock and Belle kept on studying. Neither had paid any attention at all to either Lola or James.

Instead of the structural material it had once been, the bore that the thing had traversed was now full of a sparkling, bubbling, writhing, partly-fluid-partly-viscous, obscenely repulsive mass of something unknown and unknowable on Earth; a something which, Garlock now recalled, had been thought of by the Arpalone Inspector as "glop."

As that unstoppable globe descended through office after office, it neither sought out people nor avoided them. Walls, doors, windows, ceilings, floors and rugs, office furniture and office personnel; all alike were absorbed into and made a part of that indescribably horrid brew.

Nor did the track of that hellishly wanton globe remain a bore. Instead, it spread. That devil's brew ate into and dissolved everything it touched like a stream of boiling water being poured into a loosely-heaped pile of granulated sugar. By the time the ravening sphere had reached the second floor, the entire roof of the building was gone and the writhing, racing flood of corruption had flowed down the outer walls and across the street, engulfing and transforming sidewalks, people, pavement, poles, wires, automobiles, people—anything and everything it touched.

The globe went on down, through basement and sub-basement, until it reached solid, natural ground. Then, with its top a few inches below the level of natural ground, it came to a full stop and—apparently—did nothing at all. By this time, the ravening flood outside had eaten far into the lower floors of the buildings across the street, as well as along all four sides of the block, and tremendous masses of masonry and steel, their supporting structures devoured, were subsiding, crumbling, and crashing down into the noisome flood of golop—and were being transformed almost as fast as they could fall.

One tremendous mass, weighing hundreds or perhaps thousands of tons, toppled almost as a whole; splashing the stuff in all directions for hundreds of yards. Wherever each splash

struck, however, a new center of attack came into being, and the peculiarly disgusting, abhorrent liquidation went on.

"Can you do anything with it, Clee?" Belle demanded.

"Not too much—it's a mess," Garlock replied. "Besides, it wouldn't get us far, I don't think. It'll be more productive to analyze the beams the Arpalones are using to break them up, don't you think?"

Then, for twenty solid minutes, the two Prime Operators worked on those enigmatic beams.

"We can't assemble *that* kind of stuff with our minds," Belle decided then.

"I'll say we can't," Garlock agreed. "Ten megacycles, and cycling only twenty per second." He whistled raucously through his teeth. "My guess is it'd take four months to design and build a generator to put out that kind of stuff. It's worse than our Op field."

"I'm not sure I could *ever* design one," Belle said, thoughtfully, "but of course I'm not the engineer you are . . ." Then, she could not help adding, ". . . yet."

"No, and you never will be," he said, flatly.

"NO? That's what *you* think!" Even in such circumstances as those, Belle Bellamy was eager to carry on her warfare with her Project Chief.

"That's *exactly* what I think—and I'm so close to knowing it for a fact that the difference is undetectable."

Belle almost—but not quite—blew up. "Well, what are you going to do?"

"Unless and until I can figure out something effective to do, I'm not going to try to do anything. If you, with your vaunted and flaunted belief in the inherent superiority of the female over the male, can dope out something useful before I do, I'll eat crow and help you do it. As for arguing with you, I'm all done for the moment."

Belle gritted her teeth, flounced away, and plumped herself down into a chair. She shut her eyes and put every iota of her mind to work on the problem of finding something—*anything*—that could be done to help this doomed world and to show that big, overbearing jerk of a Garlock that she was a better man than he was. Which of the two objectives loomed more important, she herself could not have told, to save her life.

And Garlock looked around. The air and the sky over the now-vanished city were both clear of Dilipic craft. The surviving Arpalone fighters and other small craft were making no attempt to land, anywhere on the world's surface. Instead, they were flying upward toward, and were being drawn one by one into the bowels of, huge Arpalonian space-freighters. When each such vessel was filled to capacity, it flew upward and set itself into a more-or-less-circular orbit around the planet.

Around and around and

around the ruined world the *Pleiades* went; recording, observing, charting. Fifty-eight of those atrocious Dilipic vortices had been driven to ground. Every large land-mass surrounded by large bodies of water had been struck once, and only once; from the tremendous area of the largest continent down to the relatively tiny expanses of the largest islands. One land-mass, one vortex. One only.

"What d'you suppose *that* means?" James asked. "Afraid of water?"

"Damfino. Could be. Let's check . . . mountains, too. Skip us back to where we started—oceans and mountains both fairly close there."

The city had disappeared long since; for hundreds of 'almost-level square miles there extended a sparkling, seething, writhing expanse of—of what? The edge of that devouring flood had almost reached the foot-hills, and over that gnawing, dissolving edge the *Pleiades* paused.

Small lakes and ordinary rivers bothered the golop very little if at all. There was perhaps a slightly increased sparkling, a slight stiffening, a little darkening, some freezing and breaking off of solid blocks; but the thing's forward motion was not noticeably slowed down. It drank a fairly large river and a lake one mile wide by ten miles long while the two men watched.

The golop made no attempt to climb either foot-hills or moun-

tains. It leveled them. It ate into their bases at its own level; the undermined masses, small and large, collapsed into the foul, corrosive semi-liquid and were consumed. Nor was there much raising of the golop's level, even when the highest mountains were reached and miles-high masses of solid rock broke off and toppled. There was some raising, of course; but the stuff was fluid enough so that its slope was not apparent to the eye.

Then the *Pleiades* went back, over the place where the city had been and on to what had once been an ocean beach. The original wave of degradation had reached that shore long since, had attacked its sands out into deep water, and there it had been stopped. The corrupt flood was now being reinforced, however, by an ever-rising tide of material that had once been mountains. And the slope, which had not been even noticeable at the mountains or over the plain, was here very evident.

As the rapidly-flowing golop struck water, the water shivered, came to a weirdly unforgettable cold boil, and exploded into drops and streamers and jagged-edged chunks of something that was neither water nor land; or rock or soil or sand or Satan's unholy brew. Nevertheless, the water won. There was so much of it! Each barrel of water that was destroyed was replaced instantly and enthusiastically; with no lowering of level or of pressure.

And when water struck the golop, the golop also shivered violently, then sparkled even more violently, then stopped sparkling and turned dark, then froze solid. The frozen surface, however, was neither thick enough nor strong enough to form an effective wall.

Again and again the wave of golop built up high enough to crack and to shatter that feeble wall; again and again golop and water met in ultimately furious, if insensate, battle. Inch by inch the ocean's shoreline was driven backward toward ocean's depths; but every inch the ocean lost was to its tactical advantage, since the advancing front was by now practically filled with hard, solid, dead blocks of its own substance which it could neither assimilate nor remove from the scene of conflict.

Hence the wall grew ever thicker and solider; the advance became slower and slower.

Then, finally, ocean waves of ever-increasing height and violence rolled in against the new-formed shore. What caused those tremendous waves—earthquakes, perhaps, due to the shifting of the mountains' masses?—no Tellurian ever surely knew. Whatever the cause, however, those waves operated to pin the golop down. Whenever and wherever one of those monstrous waves whitecapped in, hurling hundreds of thousands of tons of water inland for hundreds of yards, the battle-front stabilized then and there.

All over that world the story was the same. Wherever there was water enough, the water won. And the total quantity of water in that world's oceans remained practically unchanged.

"Good. A lot of people escaped," James said, expelling a long-held breath. "Everybody who lives on or could be flown to all the islands smaller than the biggest ones if they can find enough to eat and if the air isn't poisoned."

"Air's okay—so's the water—and they'll get food," Garlock said. "The Arpalones will handle things, including distribution. What I'm thinking about is how they're going to rehabilitate it. That, as an engineering project, is a feat to end all feats."

"*Brother!* You can play *that* in spades!" James agreed. "Except that it'll take too many months before they can even start the job, I'd like to stick around and see how they go about it. How does this kind of stuff fit into that theory you're not admitting is a theory?"

"Not worth a damn. However, it's a datum—and, as I've said before and may say again, if we can get *enough* data we can build a theory out of it."

Then it began to rain. For many minutes the clouds had been piling up—black, far-flung, thick and high. Immense bolts of lightning flashed and snapped and crackled; thunder crashed and rolled and rumbled; rain fell, and continued to fall, like a cloud-burst in Colorado. And

shortly thereafter—first by square feet and then by acres and then by square miles—the surface of the golop began to die. To die, that is, if it had ever been even partially alive. At least it stopped sparkling, darkened, and froze into thick skins; which broke up into blocks; which in turn sank—thus exposing an ever-renewed surface to the driving, pelting, relentlessly cascading rain.

"Well, I don't know that there's anything to hold us here any longer," Garlock said, finally. "Shall we go?"

They went; but it was several days before any of the wanderers really felt like smiling; and Lola did not recover from her depression for over a week.

## CHAPTER 5

SUPPER was over, but the four were still at the table, sipping coffee and smoking. During a pause in the casual conversation, James suddenly straightened up.

"I want an official decision, Clee," he said, abruptly. "While we're out of touch with United Worlds you, as captain of the ship and director of the project, are Boss, with a capital B. The Lord of Justice, High and Low. The Works. Check?"

"On paper, yes; with my decisions subject to appeal and/or review when we get back to Base. In practice, I didn't expect to have to make any very gravid rulings."

"I never thought you'd have to, either, but Belle fed me one with a bone in it, so . . ."

"Just a minute. How official do you want it? Full formal, screens down and recorded?"

"Not unless we have to. Let's explore it first. As of right now, are we under the Code or not?"

"Of course we are."

"Not necessarily," Belle put in, sharply. "Not slavishly to the letter. We're so far away and our chance of getting back is so slight that it should be interpreted in the light of common sense."

Garlock stared at Belle and she stared back, her eyes as clear and innocent as a baby's.

"The Code is neither long enough nor complicated enough to require interpretation," Garlock stated, finally. "It either applies in full and exactly or not at all. My ruling is that the Code applies, strictly, until I declare the state of Ultimate Contingency. Are you ready, Belle, to abandon the project, find an uninhabited Tellurian world, and begin to populate it?"

"Well, not quite, perhaps."

"Yes or no, please."

"No."

"We are under the Code, then. Go ahead, Jim."

"I broke pairing with Belle and she refused to confirm."

"Certainly I refused. He had no reason to break with me."

"I had plenty of reason!" James snapped. "I'm fed up to here—" he drew his right fore-

finger across his forehead, "—with making so-called love to a woman who can never think of anything except cutting another man's throat. She's a heartless conniver."

"You both know that reasons are unnecessary and are not discussed in public," Garlock said, flatly. "Now as to confirmation of a break. In simple pairing there is no marriage, no registration, no declaration of intent or of permanence. Thus, legally or logically, there is no obligation. Morally, however, there is always some obligation. Hence, as a matter of urbanity, in cases where no injury exists except as concerns chastity, the Code calls for agreement without rancor. If either party persists in refusal to confirm, and cannot show injury, that party's behavior is declared inurbane. Confirmation is declared and the offending party is ignored."

"Just how would you go about ignoring Prime Operator Belle Bellamy?"

"You've got a point there, Jim. However, she hasn't persisted very long in her refusal. As a matter of information, Belle, why did you take Jim in the first place?"

"I didn't." She shrugged her shoulders. "It was pure chance. You saw me flip the tenth-piece."

"Am I to ignore the fact that you are one of the best telekineticians living?"

"I don't *have* to control things unless I want to!" She stamped



her foot. "Can't you conceive of me flipping a coin honestly?"

"No. However, since this is not a screens-down inquiry, I'll give you—orally, at least—the benefit of the doubt. The next step, I presume, is for Lola to break with me. Lola?"

"Well . . . I hate to say this, Clee . . . I thought that mutual consent would be better, but . . ." Lola paused, flushing in embarrassment.

"She feels," James said, steadily, "as I do, that there should be much more to the sexual relation than merely releasing the biological tensions of two pieces of human machinery. That's hardly civilized."

"I confirm, Lola, of course," Garlock said; then went on, partly thinking aloud, partly addressing the group at large. "Ha. Reasons again, and very well put—not off the cuff. Evasions. Flat lies. Something very unfunny here—as queer as a nine-credit bill. In sum, indefensible actions based upon unwarranted conclusions drawn from erroneous assumptions. The pattern is not clear . . . but I won't order screens down until I have to . . . if the reason had come from Belle . . ."

"Me?" Belle flared. "Why from me?"

" . . . instead of Jim . . ." Ignoring Belle's interruption, Garlock frowned in thought. After a minute or so his face cleared.

"Jim," he said, sharply, "have you been consciously aware of Belle's manipulation?"

"Why, no, of course not. She *couldn't!*"

"That's *really* a brainstorm, Clee," Belle sneered. "You'd better turn yourself in for an overhaul."

"Nice scheme, Belle," Garlock said. "I underestimated — at least, didn't consider carefully enough—your power; and overestimated your ethics and urbanity."

"What are you talking about, Chief?" James asked. "You lost me ten parsecs back."

"Just this. Belle is behind this whole operation; working under a perfectly beautiful smoke-screen."

"I'm afraid the boss is cracking up, kids," Belle said. "Listen to him, if you like, but use your own judgment."

"But nobody could make Jim and me really love each other," Lola argued, "and we really do. It's real love."

"Admitted," Garlock said. "But she could have helped it along; and she's all set to take every possible advantage of the situation thus created."

"I still don't see it," James objected. "Why, she wouldn't even confirm our break. She hasn't yet."

"She would have, at the exactly correct psychological moment; after holding out long enough to put you both under obligation to her. There would have, also, been certain strings attached. Her plan was, after switching the pairings . . ."

"I wouldn't pair with you,"

Belle broke in viciously, "if you were the only man left in the macrocosmic universe!"

"Part of the smoke-screen," Garlock explained. "The re-pairings would give her two lines of attack on me, to be used simultaneously. First, to work on me in bed . . ."

"See?" Belle interrupted. "He doesn't think I've got any heart at all."

"Oh, you may have one, but it's no softer than your head, and that could scratch a diamond. Second, to work on you two, with no holds barred, to form a three-unit team against me. Her charges that I am losing my grip made a very smart opening lead."

"Do you think I'd let her work on me?" James demanded.

"She's a Prime—you wouldn't know anything about it. However, nothing will happen. Nor am I going to let her confuse the real issue. Belle, you are either inside the Code or a free agent outside it. Which?"

"I have made my position clear."

"To me, yes. To Jim and Lola, decidedly unclear."

"Unclear, then. You can *not* coerce me!"

"If you follow the Code, no. If you don't, I can and will. If you make any kind of a pass at Jim James from now on, I'll lock you into your room with a Gunther block."

"*You wouldn't dare!*" she breathed. "Besides, you couldn't, not to another prime."

"Don't bet on it," he advised.

After a full minute of silence Garlock's attitude changed suddenly to his usual one of casual friendliness. "Why not let this one drop right here, Belle? I can marry them, with all the official trimmings. Why not let 'em really enjoy their honeymoon?"

"Why not?" Belle's manner changed to match Garlock's and she smiled warmly. "I confirm, Jim. You two are really serious, aren't you? Marriage, declarations, registration, and everything? I wish—I sincerely and really wish you—every happiness possible."

"We really *are* serious," James said, putting his arm around Lola's waist. "And you won't . . . won't interfere?"

"Not a bit. I couldn't, now, even if I wanted to." Belle grinned wryly. "You see, you kids missed the main feature of the show, since you can't know exactly what a Prime Operator is. Especially you can't know what Cleander Simmsworth Garlock really is—he's an out-and-out tiger on wheels. The three of us could have smacked him bow-legged, but of course all chance of that blew up just now. So if you two want to take the big jump you can do it with my blessing as well as Clee's. I'll clear the table."

That small chore taken care of—a quick folding-up of everything into the tablecloth and a heave into the chute did it—Belle set up the recorder.

"Are you both fully certain that you want the full treatment?" Garlock asked.

Both were certain, and Garlock read the brief but solemn marriage lines.

As the newlyweds left the room, Belle turned to Garlock with a quizzical smile. "Are you going to ask me to pair with you, Clee?"

"I certainly am." He grinned back at her. "I owe you that much revenge, at least. But seriously, I'd like it immensely and we fit like Grace and Poise. Look at that mirror. Did you ever see a better-matched couple? Will you give me a try, Belle?"

"I will not," she said, emphatically. "I'll take back what I said a while ago—if you were really the only man left, I would—but as it is, the answer is a definite, resounding, and final 'No'."

"'Definite' and 'resounding,' yes. 'Final,' I won't accept. I'll wait."

"You'll wait a long time, Buster. My door will be locked from now on. Good night, Doctor Garlock, I'm going to bed."

"So am I." He walked with her along the corridor to their rooms, the doors of which were opposite each other. "In view of the Code, locking your door is a meaningless gesture. Mine will remain unlocked. I invite you to come in whenever you like, and assure you formally that no such entry will be regarded as an invasion of privacy."

Without a word she went into her room and closed the door

with a firmness just short of violence. Her lock clicked sharply.

The next morning, after breakfast, James followed Garlock into his room and shut the door.

"Clee, I want to tell you. I don't want to get sloppy but..."

"Want to lep it?"

"Hell, no!"

"It's about Brownie, then."

"Uh-huh. I've always liked you immensely. Admired you. Hero, sort of..."

"Yeah. I quote. 'Harder than Pharaoh's heart.' 'Colder than frozen helium,' and all the rest. But this thing about Brownie..." He reached out; two hard hands met in a crushing grip. "How could you possibly lay off? Just the strain, if nothing else."

"A little strain doesn't hurt a man unless he lets it. I've done without for months at a stretch, with it running around loose on all sides of me."

"But she's so... she's got *everything!*"

"There speaketh the ensorcelled bridegroom. For my taste, she hasn't. She told you, I suppose, when explaining a certain fact, that I told her she wasn't my type?"

"Yes, but..."

"She still isn't. She's a very fine person, with a very fine personality. She is one of the two most nearly perfect young women of her race. Her face is beautiful. Her body is an artist's dream. Her mind is one of the

very best. Besides all that, she's a very good egg and a mighty tasty dish. But put yourself in my place.

"Here's this paragon we have just described. She has extremely high ideals and she's a virgin; never really aroused. Also, she's so full of this sickening crap they've been pouring into us—propaganda, rocket-oil, prop-wash, and psychological gobbledygook—that it's running out of her ears. She's so stuffed with it that she's going to pair with you, ideals and virginity be damned, even if it kills her; even though she's shaking, clear down to her shoes—scared yellow. Also, she is and always will be scared half to death of you—she thinks you're some kind of robot. She's a starry-eyed, soft-headed sissy. A sapadilla. A sucker for a smooth line of balloon-juice and flap-doodle. No spine; no bottom. A gutless doll-baby. Strictly a pet—you could no more love her, ever, than you could a half-grown kitten."

"That's a *hell* of a picture!" James broke in savagely. "Even with your cold-blooded reputation."

"People in love can't be objective, is all. If I saw her through the same set of filters you do, I'd be in love with her, too. So let's see if you can use your brain instead of your outraged sensibilities to answer a hypothetical question. If the foregoing were true, what would you do, Junior?"

"I'd pass, I guess. I'd have to, if I wanted to look at myself in the mirror next morning. But that's such an *ungodly* cockeyed picture, Cleo. But if that's actually your picture of Brownie—and you're no part of a liar—just what kind of a woman could you love? If any?"

"Belle."

"*Belle! Belle Bellamy?* Hell's flaming furies! That iceberg? That egomaniac? That Jezebel? She's the hardest-boiled babe that ever went unhung."

"Right, on all counts. Also she's crooked and treacherous. She's a ground-and-lofty liar by instinct and training. I could add a lot more. But she's got brains, ability, and guts—guts enough to supply the Women's Army Corps. She's got the spine and the bottom and the drive. So just imagine her thawed out and really shoveling on the coal—blasting wide open on all forty torches. Back to back with you when you're surrounded; she wouldn't cave and she wouldn't give. Or wing and wing—holding the beam come hell or space-warps. Roll that one around on your tongue, Jim, and give your taste-buds a treat."

"Well, maybe . . . if I've got that much imagination . . . that's a tough blueprint to read. I can't quite visualize the finished article. However, you're as hard as she is—even harder. You've got more of what it takes. Maybe you can make a Christian out of her. If so, you might have something; but I'm damned if I

can see exactly what. Whatever it turned out to be, I wouldn't care for any part of it. You could have it all."

"Exactly; and you can have your Brownie."

"I'm beginning to see. I didn't think you had anything like that in your chilled-steel carcass. And I want to apolo . . ."

"Don't do it, boy. If the time ever comes when *you* go so soft on me as to quit laying it on the line and start sifting out your language . . ." Garlock paused. For one of the very few times in his life, he was at a loss for words. He thrust his hands into his pockets and shrugged his shoulders. "Hell, I don't want to get maudlin, either so well, how many men, do you think, could have gone the route with me on this hellish job without killing me or me killing them?"

"Oh, that's not . . ."

"Lay it on the line, Jim. I know what I am. Just one. You. One man in six thousand million. Okay; how many women could live with me for a year without going crazy?"

"Lots of 'em; but, being masochists, they'd probably drive *you* nuts. And you can't stand 'stupidity'; which, by definition, lets *everybody* out. Nope, it's a tough order to fill."

"Check. She'd have to be strong enough and hard enough not to be afraid of me, by any trace. Able and eager to stand up to me and slug it out. To pin my ears back flat against my skull

whenever she thinks I'm off the beam. Do it with skill and precision and nicety, with power and control; yet without doing herself any damage and without changing her basic feeling for me. In short, a female Jim James Nine."

"Huh? Hell's blowtorches! You think I'm like Belle Bellamy?"

"Not by nine thousand megacycles. Like Belle Bellamy could be and should be. Like I hope she will be. I'd have to give, too, of course—maybe we can make Christians out of each other. It's quite a dream, I admit, but it'll be Belle or nobody. But I'm not used to slopping over this way—let's go."

"I'm glad you did, big fellow—once in a lifetime is good for the soul. I'd say you were in love with her right now—except that if you were, you couldn't possibly dissect her like a specimen on the table, the way you've just been doing. Are you or aren't you?"

"I'll be damned if I know. You and Brownie believe that the poets' concept of love is valid. In fact, you make a case for its validity. I never have, and don't now but under certain conditions I simply don't know. Ask me again sometime; say in about a month?"

"That's the surest thing you know. Oh, *brother!* *This* is a thing I'm going to watch with my eyes out on stalks!"

For the next week, Belle

locked her door every night. For another few nights, she did not lock it. Then, one night, she left it ajar. The following evening, the two again walked together to their doors.

"I left my door open last night."

"I know you did."

"Well?"

"And have you scream to high heaven that I opened it? And put me on a tape for willful inurbanity? For deliberate intersexual invasion of privacy?"

"Blast and damn! You know perfectly well, Clee Garlock, I wouldn't pull such a dirty, lousy trick as that."

"Maybe I should apologize, then, but as a matter of fact I have no idea whatever as to what you wouldn't do." He stared at her, his face hard in thought. "As you probably know, I have had very little to do with women. That little has always been on a logical level. You are such a completely new experience that I can't figure out what makes you tick."

"So you're afraid of me," she sneered. "Is that it?"

"Close enough."

"And I suppose it's you that cartoonist what's-his-name is using as a model for 'Timorous Timmy'?"

"Since you've guessed it, yes."

"You . . . you *weasel!*" She took three quick steps up the corridor, then back. "You say my logic is cockeyed. What system are you using now?"

"I'm trying to develop one to match yours."

"Oh . . . I invited that one, I guess, since I know you aren't afraid of God, man, woman, or devil . . . and you're big enough so you don't have to be proving it all the time." She laughed suddenly, her face softening markedly. "Listen, you big lug. Why don't you ever knock me into an outside loop? If I were you and you were me, I'd've busted me loose from my front teeth long ago."

"I'm not sure whether I know better or am afraid to. Anyway, I'm not rocking any boat so far from shore."

"Says you. You're wonderful, Clee—simply priceless. Do you know you're the only man I ever met that I couldn't make fall for me like a rock falling down a cliff? And that the falling is altogether too apt to be the other way?"

"The first, I have suspected. The second is chemically-pure rocket-oil."

"I *hope* it is . . . I wish I could be as certain of it as you are. . . . You see, Clee, I really expected you to come in, last night, and there really *wasn't* any bone in it. Surely, you don't think I'm going to *invite* you into my room, do you?"

"I can't see why not. However, since no valid system of logic seems to apply, I accept your decision as a fact. By the same reasoning—however invalid—if I ask you again you will again refuse. So all that's left, I guess,

is for me to drag you into my room by force."

He put his left arm around her and applied a tiny pressure against her side; under which she began to move slowly toward his door.

"You admit that you're using force?" she asked. Her face was unreadable; her mental block was at its fullest force. "That I'm being coerced? Definitely?"

"Definitely," he agreed. "At least ten dynes of sheer brute force. Not enough to affect a tape, but enough, I hope, to affect you. If it isn't, I'll use more."

"Oh, ten dynes is enough. Just so it's force."

She raised her face toward his and threw both arms around his neck. His right arm went into action with his left, and Cleander Garlock forgot all about dynes and tapes.

After a time she disengaged one arm; reached out; opened his door. He gathered her up and, lips still locked to lips, carried her over the threshold.

A few jumps later they met their first really old Arpalone. This Inspector was so old that his skin, instead of the usual bright, clear cobalt blue, was dull and tending toward gray. The old fellow was strangely garrulous, for a Guardian; he wanted them to pause a while and gossip.

"Yes, I am lonesome," he admitted. "It has been a long time since I exchanged thoughts with

anyone. You see, nobody has visited this planet—Groobe, its name is—since almost all our humanity was killed, a few periods ago . . ."

"Killed? How?" Garlock asked sharply. "Not Dilipic?"

"Oh, you have seen them? I never have, myself. No, nothing nearly that bad. Merely the Ozobes. The world itself was scarcely harmed at all. Rehabilitation will be a simple matter, so there's no real reason why some of those Engineers . . ."

"The beast!" Lola shot a tight-beam thought at her husband. "Who cares anything about the rock and dirt of a *planet*? It's the *people* that count and his are dead and he's perfectly *com-pleasant* about it—just *lone-some*!"

"Don't let it throw you, pet," James soothed. "He's an Arpalone, you know; not a sociological anthropologist."

" . . . shouldn't come out here and spend a few hours once in a while, but they don't. Too busy with their own business, they say. But while you are physically human, mentally you are not. You're all too . . . too . . . I can't put my thought exactly on it, but . . . more as though you were human fighters, if such a thing could be possible."

"We are fighters. Where we come from, most human beings are fighters."

"Oh? I never heard of such a thing. Where can you be from?"

This took much explanation, since the Arpalone had never

heard of inter-galactic travel. "You are willing, then, to fight side by side with us Arpalones against the enemies of humanity? You have actually done so, at times, and won?"

"We certainly have."

"I am glad. I am expecting a call for help any time now. Will you please give me enough of your mental pattern, Doctor Garlock, so that I can call you in case of need? Thank you."

"What makes you think you're going to get an S.O.S. so soon? Where from?"

"Because these Ozobe invasions come in cycles, years apart, but there are always several planets attacked at very nearly the same time. We were the first, this time; so there will be one or two others very shortly."

"Do they always . . . kill all the people?" Lola asked.

"Oh, no. Scarcely half of the time. Depends on how many fighters the planet has, and how much outside help can get there soon enough."

"Your call could come from any of the other solar systems in this neighborhood, then?" Garlock asked.

"Yes. There are fifteen inhabited planets within about six light-years of us, and we form a close-knit group."

"What are these Ozobes?"

"Animals. Warm-blooded, but egg-layers, not mammals. Like this," and the Inspector spread in their minds a picture of a creature somewhat like the flying tigers of Hodell, except that

the color was black, shading off to iridescent green at the extremities. Also, it was armed with a short and heavy, but very sharp, sting.

"They say that they come from space, but I don't believe it," the old fellow went on. "What would a warm-blood be doing out in space? Besides, they couldn't find anybody to lay their eggs in out there. No, sir, I think they live right here on Groobe somewhere, maybe holed up in caves or something for ten or thirteen years but that wouldn't make sense, either, would it? I just don't know ."

Garlock finally broke away from the lonesome Inspector and the *Pleiades* started down.

"That's the most utterly *horrible* thing I ever heard of in my life!" Lola burst out. "Like wasps — only worse — *people* aren't bugs! Why don't all the planets get together and develop something to kill every Ozobe in every system of the group?"

"That one has got too many bones in it for me to answer," James said.

"I'm going to get hold of that Engineer as soon as we land," Lola said, darkly, "and stick a pin into him."

They found the Engineering Office easily enough, in a snug camp well outside a large city. They grounded the starship and went out on foot; enjoying contact with solid ground. The Head Engineer was an Arpalone, too—Engineers were not a sep-



arate race, but dwellers on a planet of extremely high technology—but he did know anything about space-drives. His specialty was rehabilitation; he was top boss of a rehab crew . . .

Then Lola pushed Garlock aside. Yes, the Ozobes came from space. He was sure of it. Yes, they laid eggs in human bodies. Yes, they probably stayed alive quite a while—or might, except for the rehab crew. No, he didn't *know* what would hatch out—he'd never let one live that long, but what the hell else *could* hatch except Ozobes? No, not one. Not one single damn one. If just one ever did, on any world where he bossed the job, he'd lose his job as boss and go to the mines for half a year . . .

"Ridiculous!" Lola snapped. "If Ozobes hatched, they couldn't possibly have come from space. If they *did* come from space, the adult form would have to be something able to get back into space, some way or other. *That* is simple elementary biology. Don't you see that?"

He didn't see it. He didn't give a damn, either. It was none of his business; he was a rehab man.

Lola ran back to the ship in disgust.

"Something else is even more ridiculous, and *is* your business," James told the Head Engineer. "Garlock and I are both engineers—top ones. We know definitely that a one-hundred-percent clean-up on such a job as

this—millions—simply can't be done. Ever. Under any conditions. Are you lying in your teeth or are you dumb enough to believe it yourself?"

"Neither one," the Engineer insisted, stubbornly. "I've wondered, myself, at how I could get 'em all, but I always do—every time so far. That's why they give me the big job. I'm good at it."

"Oh—Lola's right, Jim," Garlock said. "It's the adult form that hatches; something so different they don't even recognize it. Something able to get into space. Enough survivors to produce the next generation."

"Sure. I'll tell Brownie—she'll be tickled."

"She'll be more than tickled—she'll want to hunt up somebody around here with three brain cells working and give 'em an earful." Then, to the Engineer, "Do you know how they rehab a planet that's been leveled flat by the golop?"

"You've *seen* one? I never have, but of course I've studied it. Slow, but not too difficult. After killing, the stuff weathers down in a few years—wonderful soil it makes—what makes it slow is that you have to wait fifty or a hundred years for the mountains to get built up again and for the earthquakes to quit . . ."

"Excuse me, please—I've got a call—we have to leave, right now."

The call was from the Inspector. The nearest planet, Clamer,

was being invaded by the Ozobes and needed all the help they could get.

In seconds the *Pleiades* was at the Port of Entry.

"Where is this Clamer?" Garlock asked.

The Inspector pointed a thought; all four followed it.

"Let's go, Jim. Maybe ."

"Just a minute!" Lola snapped. She was breathing hard, her eyes were almost shooting sparks as she turned to the old Arpalone and drove a thought so forcibly that he winced.

"Do you so-called 'Guardians of Humanity' care at all about the humanity you're supposed to be protecting?" she demanded viciously, the thought boring in and twisting, "or are you just loafing on the job and doing as little as you possibly can without getting fired?"

Belle and Garlock looked at each other and grinned. James was surprised and shocked. This woman blowing her top was no Brownie Montandon any of them knew.

"We do everything we possibly can," the Inspector was not only shocked, but injured and abused. "If there's any one possible thing we haven't done, even the tiniest ."

"There's plenty!" she snapped. "Plain, dumb stupidity, then, it must be. There must be *somebody* around here who has been at least exposed to elementary biology! You should have exterminated these Ozobe vermin

ages ago. All you have to do is find out what its life cycle is. How many stages and what they are. How the adults get into space and where they go," and she went on, in flashing thoughts, to explain in full detail. "Are you smart enough to understand that?"

"Oh, yes. Your thought may be the truth, at that."

"And are you interested enough to find out whose business it would be, and follow through on it?"

"Yes, of course. If it works, I'll be quite famous for suggesting it. I'll give you part of the credit ."

"Keep the credit—just see to it that it gets *done*!" She whirled on James. "This loss of human life is so *appallingly* unnecessary! This time we're going to Clamer, and nowhere else. Push the button, Jim."

"All I can do is set up for it, pet. Whether we . . ."

"We'll get there!" she blazed. "It's high time we got a break. *Punch* it! *This* time the ship's going to *Clamer*, if we have to all get out and *push* it there! Now punch that button!"

James pushed the button, glanced into his scanner, and froze; eyes staring. He did not even whistle. Belle, however, did; with ear-shattering volume. Garlock's mouth fell open in the biggest surprise of his life. They were in the same galaxy!

All three had studied charts of nebular configurations so long and so intensely that recogni-

tion of a full-sphere identity was automatic and instantaneous.

Lola, head buried in scanner, had already checked in with the Port Inspector.

"It is Clamer!" she shrieked aloud. "I told you it was time for our luck to change, if we pulled hard enough! They are being invaded by Ozobes and they did call for help and they didn't think we could possibly get here this fast and we don't need to be inspected because we're compatible or we couldn't have landed on Groobe!"

For five long minutes Garlock held the starship motionless while he studied the entire situation. Then he drove a probe through the mental shield of the general in charge of the whole defense operation.

"Battle-Cruiser *Pleiades*, Captain Garlock commanding, reporting for duty in response to your S.O.S. received on Groobe."

The general, furiously busy as he was, dropped all other business. "But you're *human*! You can't fight!"

"Watch us. You don't know, apparently, that the Ozobe bases are on the far side of your moon. They're bringing their fighters in most of the way in transports."

"Why, they can't be! They're coming in from all directions from deep space!"

"That's what they want you to think. They're built to stand many hours of zero pressure and almost absolute zero cold. Question: if we destroy all their

transport, say in three hours, can you handle all the fighters who will be in the air or in nearby space at that time?"

"Very easily. They've hardly started yet. I appoint you Admiral-pro-tem Garlock, in command of Space Operations, and will refer to you any other space-fighters who may come. I thank you, sir. Good luck."

The general returned his attention to his boiling office. His mind was seething with questions as to what these not-human beings were, how or if they knew so much, and so on; but he forced them out of his mind and went, fast and efficient, back to work. James shot the *Pleiades* up to within a thousand miles or so of the moon.

"How long does it take to learn this bombing business, Jim?" Lola asked.

"About fifteen seconds. All you have to do is *want* to. Do you, really?"

"I really do. If I don't do something to help these people," it did not occur to her that she had already done a tremendous job, "I'll never forgive myself."

James showed her; and, much to her surprise, she found it very easy to do.

The vessels transporting the invading forces were huge, spherical shells equipped with short-range drives—and with nothing else. No accommodations, no facilities, no food, no water, not even any air. Each transport, when filled to the

bursting-point with as-yet-docile cargo, darted away; swinging around to approach Clamer from some previously-assigned direction. It did not, however, approach the planet's surface. At about two thousand miles out, great ports opened and the load was dumped out into space, to fall the rest of the way by gravity. Then the empty shell, with only its one pilot aboard, rushed back for another load.

"How heavy shots, Clee?" James asked. He and Lola were getting into their scanners. "Wouldn't take as much as a kiloton equivalent, would it?"

"Half a kilo is plenty, but no use being too fussy about precision out here."

Garlock and Belle were already bombing; James and Lola began. Slow and awkward at first, Lola soon picked up the technique and was firing blast for blast with the others. No more loaded transport vessels left the moon. No empty one, returning toward the moon, reached there. In much less than the three hours Garlock had mentioned, every Ozobian transport craft had been destroyed.

"And now the real job begins," Garlock said, as James dropped the starship down to within a few miles of the moon's surface.

That surface was cratered and jagged, exactly like that of the half always facing Clamer. No sign of activity could be seen by eye, nor anything unusual. Even

the immense trap-doors, all closed now, matched exactly their surroundings. Underground, however, activity was violently intense; and, now, confused in the extreme.

"Why, there isn't a single adult anywhere!" Lola exclaimed. "I thought the whole place would be full of 'em!"

"So did I," Belle said. "However, by hindsight, it's plain enough. Their job done, they were killed and eaten. Last meal, perhaps."

"I'm afraid so. Whatever they were, they had hands and brains. Just *look* at those shops and machines!"

"What do we do, boss?" James asked. "Run a search pattern first?"

"We'll have to, I guess, before we can lay the job out."

It was run and Garlock frowned in thought. "Almost half the moon covered—honeycombed. We'll have to fine-tooth it. Around the periphery first, then spiral into the center. This moon isn't very big, but even so this is going to be a hell of a long job. Any suggestions, anybody? Jim?"

"The only way, I guess. You can't do it hit-or-miss. I'm *damn* glad we've got plenty of stuff in our Op field and plenty of hydride for the engines. The horses will all know they've been at work before they get the field filled up again."

"So will you, Junior, believe me. Ready, all? Start blasting."

Then, for three hours, the *Pleiades* moved slowly—for her—along a plotted and automatically-controlled course. It was very easy to tell where she had been; the sharply-cut, evenly-spaced, symmetrical pits left by the Galaxian's full-conversion blasts were entirely different from the irregularly-cratered, ages-old original surface.

"Knock off, Brownie," Garlock said then. "Go eat all you can hold and get some sleep. Come back in three hours. Jim, cut our speed to seventy-five percent."

Lola shed her scanner, heaved a tremendous sigh of relief, and disappeared.

Three silent hours later—all three were too intensely busy to think of anything except the work in hand—Lola came back.

"Take Belle's swath, Brownie. Okay, Belle, you can lay off. Three hours."

"I'll stay," Belle declared. "Go yourself; or send Jim."

"Don't be any more of a damn fool than you have to. I said beat it."

"And I said I wouldn't. I'm just as good . . ."

"Chop it off!" Garlock snapped. "It isn't a case of being just as good as. It's a matter of physical reserves. Jim and I have more to draw on for the long shifts than you have. So get the hell out of here or I'll stop the ship and slap you even sillier than you are now."

Belle threw up her head, tossing her shoulder-length green mop in her characteristic gesture

of defiance; but after holding Garlock's hard stare for a moment she relaxed and smiled.

"Okay, Clee—and thanks for the kind words."

She disappeared and the work went on.

And finally, when all four were so groggy that they could scarcely think, the job was done and checked. Clamer's moon was as devoid of life as any moon had ever been.

Lola pitched her scanner at its rack and threw herself face-down on a davenport, sobbing uncontrollably. James sat down beside her and soothed her until she quieted down.

"You'd better eat something, sweetheart, and then for a good, long sleep."

"Eat? Why, I couldn't, Jim, not possibly."

"Let her sleep first, I think, Jim," Belle said, and followed with her eyes as Jim picked his wife up and carried her into the corridor.

"We'd better eat *something*, I suppose," Belle said, thoughtfully. "I don't feel like eating, either, but I never realized until this minute just how much this has taken out of me and I'd better start putting it back in. . . She did a wonderful job, Clee, even if she couldn't take it full shift toward the last."

"I'll say she did. I hated like the devil to let her work that way, but . . . you knew I was scared witless every second until we topped off."

Exhausted and haggard as she was, Belle laughed. "I know damn-blasted well you weren't; but I know what you mean. Fighting something you don't know anything about, and can't guess what may happen next, is tough. Seconds count." Side by side, they strolled toward the alcove.

"I simply didn't think she had it in her," Belle marveled.

"She didn't. She hasn't. It'll take her a week to get back into shape."

"Right. She was going on pure nerve at the last—nothing else but she did a job, and she's so sweet and fine . . . I wonder, Clee, if . . . if I've been missing the boat . . ."

"You have not." Garlock sent the thought so solidly that Belle jumped. "If you'd just let yourself be, you'd be worth a million of her, just as you stand."

"Yes? You lie in your teeth, Cleander, but I love it. Oh, I don't know what I want to eat—if anything."

"I'll think up yours, too, along with mine."

"Please. Something light, and just a little."

"Yeah. Sit down. Just a light snack—a two-pound steak, rare; a bowl of mushrooms fried in butter; French fries, french dips, salad, and a quart of coffee. The same for me, except more of each. Here we are."

"Why, Clee, I couldn't *possibly* eat half of that. . . ." Then, after a quarter of it was gone, "I *am* hungry, at that—simply raven-

ous. I could eat a horse and saddle, and chase the rider."

"That's what I thought. I knew I could, and figured you accordingly."

They ate those tremendous meals slowly, enjoying every bite and sip; in an atmosphere of friendliness and good fellowship; chatting on a wide variety of subjects as they ate. Neither was aware of the fact that this was the first time they had ever been on *really* friendly terms. And finally every dish and container was empty, almost polished clean.

"One hundred percent capacity—can chew but can't swallow," Garlock said then, lighting two cigarettes and giving Belle one. "How's that for a masterly job of calibration?"

"Me, too. It'll pass." Belle sighed in repletion. "Your ability to estimate the exact capacity of containers is exceeded only by your good looks and by the size of your feet. And now to hit the good old sack for an indefinite but very long period of time."

"You chirped it, birdie." Still eminently friendly, the two walked together to their doors. Belle put up a solid block and paused, irresolute, twisting the toe of one slipper into the carpet.

"Clee, I . . . I wonder . . . if . . ." Her voice died away.

"I know what you mean." He put his arms around her gently, tenderly, and looked deep into her eyes. "I want to tell you something, Belle. You're a wom-

an, not in seven thousand million women, but in that many planets full of women. What it takes, you very definitely and very abundantly have got. And you aren't the only one that's pooped. I don't need company tonight, either. I'm going to sleep until I wake up, if it takes all day. Or say, if you wake up first, why not punch me and we'll have breakfast together?"

"That's a thought. Do the same for me. Good night, Clee."

"Good night, ace." He kissed her, as gently as he had been holding her, opened her door, closed it after her, and stepped across the corridor into his own room.

"*What* a man!" Belle breathed to herself, behind the solid screens of her room. "He thought I was too tired, not just scared to death too. *What a man!* Belle Bellamy, you ought to be kicked from here to Tellus. . ." Then she threw back her head, drove a hard little fist into a pillow, and spoke aloud through clenched teeth. "No, damn and blast it, I *won't* give in. I *won't* love him. I'll take the Project away from him if it's the last thing I ever do in this life!"

She woke up the next morning—not morning, either, since it was well after noon—a little before Garlock did, but not much. When she went into his room he was shaved and fully dressed except for one shoe, which he was putting on.

"Hi, boss! Better we eat, huh? Not only am I starving by inches, but if we don't eat pretty quick we'll get only one meal today instead of three. Did you eat your candy bar?"

"I sure did, ace."

"Oh, I'm still 'ace'? You can kiss me, then," and she raised her face toward his.

He kissed her, still tenderly, and they strolled to and through the Main and into the alcove. James and Lola, the latter looking terribly strained and worn, had already eaten, but joined them in their after-breakfast coffee and cigarettes.

"You've checked, of course," Garlock said. "Everything on the beam?"

"Dead center. Even to Lola and her biologists. Everybody's full of joy and gratitude and stuff—as well as information. And we managed to pry ourselves loose without waking you two trumpet-of-doom sleepers up. So we're ready to jump again. I wonder where in *hell* we'll wind up *this* time."

"I'm glad you said that, Jim." Garlock said. "It gives me the nerve to spring a thing on you that I've been mulling around in my mind ever since we landed here."

"Nerve? You?" James asked, incredulously. "Pass the coffee-pot around again, Brownie. If that character there said what I heard him say, this'll make your hair stand straight up on end."

"On our jumps we've had al-

together too much power and no control whatever . . ." Garlock paused in thought.

"Like a rookie pitcher," Belle suggested.

"Uh-uh," Lola objected. "It *couldn't* be that wild. He'd have to stand with his back to the plate and pitch the ball over the center-field stands and seven blocks down-town."

"Cut the persiflage, you two," Garlock ordered. "Consider three things. First, as you all know, I've been trying to figure out a generator that would give us intrinsic control, but I haven't got any farther with it than we did back on Tellus. Second, consider all the jumps we've made except this last one. Every time we've taken off, none of us has had his shield really up. You, Jim, were concentrating on the drive, and so were wide open to it. The rest of us were at least thinking about it, and so were more or less open to it. Not one of us has ever ordered it to take us to any definite place; in fact, I don't believe that anyone of us has ever even suggested a destination. Each one of us has been thinking, at the instant of energization of the fields, exactly what you just said, and with exactly the same emphasis.

"Third, consider this last jump all by itself. It's the first time we've ever stayed in the same galaxy. It's the first time we've ever gone where we wanted to. And it's the first time—here's the crux, as I see it—that any of us has been concentrating on

any destination at the moment of firing the charge. Brownie was willing the *Pleiades* to this planet so hard that we all could taste it. The rest of us, if not really pushing to get here, were at least not opposed to the idea. Check?"

"Check." "That's right." "Yes, I was pushing with all my might," came from the three listeners, and James went on:

"Are you saying the damn thing's *alive*?"

"No. I'm saying I don't believe in miracles. I don't believe in coincidence—that concept is as meaningless as that of paradox. I certainly do *not* believe that we hit this planet by chance against odds of almost infinity to one. So I've been looking for a reason. I found one. It goes against my grain—against everything I've ever believed—but, since it's the only possible explanation, it must be true. The only possible director of the Gunther Drive *must* be the mind."

"Hell's blowtorches— Now you're *insisting* that the damn thing's alive."

"Far from it. It's Brownie who's alive. It was Brownie who got us here. Nothing else—repeat, *nothing* else — makes sense."

James pondered for a full minute. "I wouldn't buy it except for one thing. If you, the hardest-boiled skeptic that ever went unhung, can feed yourself the whole bowl of such a mess as that, I can at least take a taste of it. Shoot."



"Okay. You know that we don't know anything really fundamental about either teleportation or the drive. I'm sure now that the drive is simply mechanical teleportation. If you tried to 'port yourself without any idea of where you wanted to go, where do you think you'd land?"

"You might scatter yourself all over space—no, you wouldn't. You wouldn't move, because it wouldn't be teleportation at all. Destination is an integral part of the concept."

"Exactly so—but only because you've been conditioned to it all your life. This thing hasn't been conditioned to anything."

"Like a new-born baby," Lola suggested.

"Life again," James said. "I can't see it—too many bones in it. Pure luck, even at those odds, makes a lot more sense."

"And to make matters worse," Garlock went on as though neither of them had spoken. "Just suppose that a man had four minds instead of one and they weren't working together. Then where would he go?"

This time, James simply whistled; the girls stared, speechless.

"I think we've proved that my school of mathematics was right—the thing was built to operate purely at random. Fotheringham was wrong. However, I missed the point that if control is possible, the controller must be a mind. Such a possibility never occurred to me or anyone working with me. Or to Fotheringham or to anybody else."

"I can't say I'm sold, but it's easy to test and the results can't be any worse. Let's go."

"How would you test it?"

"Same way you would. Only way. First, each one of us alone. Then pairs and threes. Then all all four together. Fifteen tests in all. No. Three destinations for each set-up; near, medium, and far. Except Tellus, of course; we'd better save that shot until we learn all we can find out. Everybody not in the set should screen up as solidly as they can set their blocks—eyes shut, even, and concentrating on something else. Check?"

James did not express the thought that Tellus must by now be so far away that no possible effort could reach it; but he could not repress the implication.

"Check. I'll concentrate on a series of transfinite numbers. Belle, you work on the possible number of shades of the color green. Lola, on how many different perfumes you can identify by smell. Jim, hit the button."

## CHAPTER 6

SINCE the tests took much time, and were strictly routine in nature, there is no need to go into them in detail. At their conclusion, Garlock said:

"First: either Jim alone, or Lola alone, or Jim and Lola together, can hit any destination within any galaxy, but can't go from one galaxy to another.

"Second: either Belle or I, or

any combination containing either of us without the other, has no control at all.

"Third: Belle and I together, or any combination containing both of us, can go inter-galactic under control.

"In spite of confession being supposed to be good for the soul, I don't like to admit that we've put gravel in the gear-box—do you, Belle?" Garlock's smile was both rueful and forced.

"You can play *that* in spades." Belle licked her lips; for the first time since boarding the starship she was acutely embarrassed. "We'll have to, of course. It was all my fault—it makes me look like a damned stupid juvenile delinquent."

"Not by nineteen thousand kilocycles, since neither of us had any idea. I'll be glad to settle for half the blame."

"Will you please stop talking Sanskrit?" James asked. "Or lep it, so we two innocent bystanders can understand it?"

"Will do," and Garlock went on in thought. "Remember what I said about this drive not being conditioned to anything? I was wrong. Belle and I have conditioned it, but badly. We've been fighting so much that something or other in that mess down there has become conditioned to her; something else to me. My part will play along with anyone except Belle; hers with anybody except me. Anti-conditioning, you might call it. Anyway, they lay back their ears and balk."

"Oh, hell!" James snorted. "Talk about gobbledegook! You are still saying that that conglomeration of copper and silver and steel and insulation that we built ourselves has got intelligence, and I still won't buy it."

"By no means. Remember, Jim, that this concept of mechanical teleportation, and that the mind is the only possible controller, are absolutely new. We've got to throw out all previous ideas and start new from scratch. I postulate, as a working hypothesis drawn from original data as modified by these tests, that that particular conglomeration of materials generates at least two fields about the properties of which we know nothing at all. That one of those properties is the tendency to become preferentially resonant with one mind and preferentially non-resonant with another. Clear so far?"

"As mud. It's a mighty tough blueprint to read." James scowled in thought. "However, it's no harder to swallow than Sander-son's Theory of Teleportation. Or, for that matter, the actual basic coupling between mind and ordinary muscular action. Does that mean we'll have to rebuild half a million credits' worth of . . . no, you and Belle can work it, together."

"I don't know." Garlock paced the floor. "I simply can't see any possible mechanism of coupling."

"Subconscious, perhaps," Belle suggested.

"For my money that whole

concept is invalid," Garlock said. "It merely changes 'I don't know' to 'I can't know' and I don't want any part of that. However, 'unconscious' could be the answer if so, we may have a lever Belle, are you willing to bury your hatchet for about five minutes—work with me like a partner ought to?"

"I certainly am, Clee. Honestly. Screens down flat, if you say so."

"Half-way's enough, I think—you'll know when we get down there." Her mind joined his and he went on, "Ignore the machines themselves completely. Consider only the fields. Feel around with me—keep tuned!—see if there's anything at all here that we can grab hold of and manipulate, like an Op field except probably very much finer. I'll be completely damned if I can see how this type of Gunther generator can put out a manipulable field, but it must. That's the only—O-W-R-C-H-H!"

This last was a yell of pure mental agony. Both hands flew to his head, his face turned white, sweat poured, and he slumped down unconscious.

He came to, however, as the other three were stretching him out on a davenport. Belle was mopping his face with a handkerchief.

"What happened, Clee?" All three were exclaiming at once.

"I found my manipulable field, but a bomb went off in my brain when I straightened it out." He searched his mind anxiously,

then smiled. "But no damage done—just the opposite. It opened up a Gunther cell I didn't know I had. Didn't it sock you, too, Belle?"

"Uh-uh," she said, more than half bitterly. "I must not have one. That makes you a Super-Prime, if I may name a new classification."

"Nonsense! Of course you've got it. Unconscious, of course, like me, but without it you couldn't have conditioned the field. But why Oh, what bit me was the one conditioned to me."

"Oh, nice!" Belle exclaimed. "Come on, Clee—let's go get mine!"

"Do you want a bit of knowledge *that* badly, Belle?" Lola asked. "Besides, wait, he isn't strong enough yet."

"Of course he's strong enough. A little knock like that? *Want* it! I'd give my right leg and . . . and almost *anything* for it. It didn't kill him, so it won't kill me."

"There may be an easier way," Garlock said. "I wouldn't wish a jolt like that onto my worst enemy. But that had two hundred kilovolts and four hundred kilogunts behind it. Since I know now where and what the cell is, I think I can open it up for you without being quite so rough."

"Oh, lovely. Come in, quick! I'm ready now."

Garlock went in; and wrought. It took longer—half an hour, in

fact—but it was very much easier to take.

"What did it feel like, Belle?" Lola asked, eagerly. You winced like he was drilling teeth and struck a couple of nerves."

"Uh-uh. More like being stretched all out of shape. Like having a child, maybe, in a small way. Let's go, Clee!"

They joined up and went.

"Ha, *there* you are, you cantankerous little fabrication of nothings!" Belle said aloud, in a low, throaty, gloating voice. "Take *that*—and *that*! And now behave yourself. If you don't, mama spank—but *good*!" Then, breaking connection, "Thanks a million, Clee; you're tall, solid gold. Do you want to run some more tests, to see which of us is the intergalactic transporter?"

"Not unless you do."

"Who, me? I'll be tickled to death not to; just like I'd swallowed an ostrich feather. Back to Tellus, then?"

"Tellus, here we come," Garlock said. "Jim, what are the Tellurian figures for exactly five hundred miles up?"

"I'll punch 'em—got 'em in my head." James did so. "Shall Brownie and I set our blocks?"

"No," Belle said. "Nothing can interfere with us now."

"Ready." Garlock sat down in the pilot's seat. "Cluster 'round, chum."

Belle leaned against the back of the chair and put both arms around Garlock's neck. "I'm clustered."

"The spot we're shooting at is exactly over the exact center of the middle blast-pit at Port Gunther. In sync?"

"To a skillionth of a whillionth of a microphase. I'm *exactly* on and locked. Shoot."

"Now, you sheet-iron bucket of nuts and bolts, *jump*!" and Garlock snapped the red switch.

Earth lay beneath them. So did Port Gunther.

"Hu-u-u-uh!" Garlock's huge sigh held much more of relief than of triumph.

"They did it! We're home!" Lola shrieked; and, breaking into unashamed and unrestrained tears, went into her husband's extended arms.

"Cry ahead, sweet. I'd bawl myself if Garlock wasn't looking. Maybe I will, anyway," James said. Then, extending his right arm to Garlock and to Belle, "I was scared to death you couldn't make it except by back tracking. Good going, you two Primes," but his thoughts said vastly more than his words.

Belle's eyes, too, were wet; Garlock's own were not quite dry.

"You weren't as sure as you looked, then, that we could do it the hard way," Belle said. "All inside, I was one quivering mass of jelly."

"Afterward, you mean. You were solid as Gibraltar when I fired the charge. You're the kind of woman a man wants with him when the going's tough. Slide around here a little, so I can get hold of you."

Garlock released Belle—finally—and turned to the pilot, who was just pulling a data-sheet from Compy the Computer. "How far did we miss target, Jim?"

James held up his right hand, thumb and forefinger forming a circle. "You're one point eight seven inches high, and off center point five three inches to the north northeast by east. I hereby award each of you the bronze medal of Marksman First. Shall I take her down now or do you want to check in from here first?"

"Neither . . . I think. What do you think, Belle?"

"Right. Not until you-know-what."

"Check. Until we decide whether or not to let them know just yet that we can handle the ship. If we do, how many of our taped reports we turn in and how many we toss down the chute."

"I get it!" James exclaimed, with a spreading grin. "*That*, my dear people, is something I never expected to live long enough to see—our straight-laced Doctor Garlock applying the Bugger Factor to a research problem!"

"I prefer the term 'Monk's Coefficient,' myself," Garlock said, "from the standpoint of mathematical rigor."

"At Polytech we called it 'Finagle's Formula'," Belle commented. "The most widely applicable operator known."

"Have you three lost your minds?" Lola demanded. "That's nothing to joke about—you wouldn't destroy official reports! All that astronomy and anthropology that nobody ever even dreamed of before? You *couldn't*! Not *possibly*!"

"Each of us knows just as well as you do how much data we have, exactly how new and startling it is; but we've thought ahead farther than you have. None of us likes the idea of destroying it a bit better than you do. We won't, either, without your full, unreserved, whole-hearted consent, nor without your fixed, iron-clad, unshakable determination never to reveal any least bit of it."

"That language is far too strong for me. I'd like to be able to go along with you, but on those terms, I simply can't."

"I think you can, when you've thought it through. You've met Alonzo P. Ferber, haven't you? Read him?"

"One glimpse; that was all I could stand. He pawed me mentally and wanted to paw me physically, the first time I ever saw him."

"Check. So I'm going to ask you two questions, which you may answer as an anthropologist, as Lola Montandon, as Mrs. James James James the Ninth, as a member of our team, or as any other character you choose to assume. Remembering that Ferber's a Gunther First—and pretends to be an Operator whenever he can get away with it—

should he, or anyone like him, ever be allowed to visit Hodell? Second question: if there is any possible way for him to get there, can he be made to stay away?"

"Oh . . . Grand Lady Neldine and that perfectly stunning Grand Lady Lemphi they picked out for Jim—they're such nice people—and the Gunther genes. As Lola thought on, her expressive face showed a variety of conflicting emotions before it hardened into decision. "The answer to both questions—the only possible answer—is no. I subscribe; on the exact terms you stipulated. And you don't believe, Clea, that my thesis had anything to do with my holding out at first?"

"Certainly I don't. Besides . . ."

"What thesis?" Belle asked.

"For my Ph.D. in anthropology. I thought I had it made, but it just went down the chute. And I don't know if any of you realize just how nearly impossible it is to make a really worthwhile original contribution to science in that field."

"As I started to tell you, Brownie," Garlock said, "I don't think you've lost a thing. There's a bigger and better one coming up."

"What?"

"Sh-h-h-h," Belle stage-whispered. "He's got a theory—such a weirdie that he won't talk about it to anybody."

"It isn't a theory yet—at least,

not ripe enough to pick—but it's something more than a hunch," Garlock said.

"But what could *possibly* make as good a thesis as those extragalactic tapes?" Lola wailed. "They would have made my thesis a summer breeze."

"More like a hurricane—the hottest thing since doctorate disputations first started," Garlock said. "However, as I started to say twice before, it still will be. Intra-galactic tapes will be just as good. In this case, better."

"W-e-l-l . . . possibly. But we haven't any."

"That is what this conference is about. We can't destroy the stuff we have unless we can replace it with something better. My idea is that we should visit a few—say fifty—Tellus-type planets in this galaxy; the ones closest to Tellus. I'm pretty sure they'll be inhabited by *Homo Sapiens*. There's a chance, of course, that they'll be like Hodell and the others we've seen; in which case I don't see how we can keep Gunther genes confined to Earth. However, I'm pretty sure in my own mind that we'll find them all very much like Tellus, Gunther and all. What would you think of *that* for a thesis, Lola?"

"Oh, wonderful!"

"Okay. Now to get back to whether we want to check in or not. I don't like to duck out without letting them know we can handle this heap—after a fashion, that is; they don't need to know we can really handle it—

but we've got nothing we can report and Fatso will blow his stack— Oh-oh! Should've remembered Tellus isn't Hodell; the tri-di's setting up! Belle, you take it. She'd give me Fatso, because he wants to chew me out, but she won't put him on for you. Cut her throat, but good! Brownie, hide somewhere! Jim, set up for Beta Centauri—not Alpha, but Beta—and fast! Give her hell, Belle!" Garlock sent this last thought from behind a davenport, from which hiding-place he could see the tridi screen and both Belle and James; but anyone on the screen could not see him.

Miss Foster's likeness appeared upon the screen. Chancellor Ferber's secretary was a big woman, but not fat; middle-aged, gray-haired, wearing consciously the aura and the domineering, overbearing expression of a woman who has great power and an even greater drive to exert her authority.

"Why haven't you reported in?" Miss Foster snapped, with a glare that was pure frost. "You arrived thirteen minutes ago. Such delay is inexcusable. Get Garlock."

"Captain Garlock is off-watch; asleep. I, Commander Bellamy, am in command." Standing stiffly at attention, Belle paused to exchange glares with the woman across the big desk. If Miss Foster's was frost, Commander Bellamy's was helium ice.

"Ready to go, Jim?" Belle flashed the thought.

"Half a minute yet."

"Any time after I sign off. Pick your own spot." Then aloud into the screen: "I will report to Chancellor Ferber. I will not report to Chancellor Ferber's secretary."

"Doctor James!" Miss Foster's voice was neither as cold nor as steady as it had been. "Bring that ship down at once!"

James made no sign that he had heard the order. Belle stood changelessly stiff. She had not for an instant taken her coldly competent eyes from those of the woman on the ground. Her emotionless, ultra-refrigerated voice went, as ever, directly into the screen.

"I trust that this conversation is being recorded?"

"It certainly is!"

"Good. I want it on record that we, the personnel of the starship *Pleiades*, are not subject to the verbal orders of the Chancellor's secretary. You will now connect me with Chancellor Ferber, please."

"The Chancellor is in conference and is not to be disturbed. I have authority to act for him. You will report to me, and do it right now." Foster's voice rose almost to a scream.

"That ground has been covered. Since you have taken it upon yourself to exceed your authority to such an extent as to refuse to connect the officer in command of the *Pleiades* with the Chancellor, I cannot report

to him either the reasons why we are not landing at this time or when we expect to return to Tellus. You are advised that we may leave at any instant, just like that!" Belle snapped her finger under the imaged nose. "You may inform the Chancellor, or not inform him if you prefer, that our control of the starship *Pleiades* is something less than perfect. I do not know exactly how many seconds longer we will be here. Commander Bellamy signing off. Over and out."

"Commander Bellamy, indeed! Commander my left foot!" Miss Foster was screaming now, in thwarted fury. "You're no more a commander than my lowest office-girl is! Just wait 'till you get down here, you green-haired hussy, you shameless notor..." The set went instantaneously from full volume to zero sound as James drove the red button home.

"Belle, you honey!" Garlock scrambled out from behind the davenport, seized her around the waist, and swung her, feet high in air, through four full circles before he let her down and kissed her vigorously. "You little sweetheart! You're the first living human being ever to really pull Foster's cork!"

"What a goat-getting!" James applauded. "That will go down in history as the star-spangled act of the century."

Belle was, however, unusually diffident. "I stuck my neck out a mile—worse, Clee's. I'm sorry,

Clee. I had to have some weight to throw around, and I had only a second to think, and that was the first thing I thought of, and after half a minute she made me so damn mad that I went entirely too far."

"Uh-uh. Just far enough. That was a perfect job."

"But she'll never forget that, and she'll crucify you, as well as me, when we land. She knows I'm not a commander."

"She just thinks you ain't. The official log will show, though, that after only one day out I discovered that we should all be officers—one captain and three commanders—with pay and perquisites of rank. I'll think up good and sufficient reasons for it between now and when I make up the log."

"But you can't! Or can you, really?"

"Well, nobody told me I couldn't, so I assumed the right. Besides, you didn't tell her commander of what, so I'll make it stick, too—see if I don't. Or else I'll tear two or three offices apart finding out why I can't. You can be sure of that."

"All that may not be necessary," Lola said. "That tape will never be heard. I'll bet she's erased it already."

"Perhaps; but ours isn't going to be erased—it will be heard exactly where it will do the most good."

"I'm awfully glad you don't think we're on the hook. All that's left, then, is that second-in-command business. Both of



you know, of course, that that was just window-dressing."

"You were telling the truth and didn't know it," James said, cheerfully. "You have actually been second-in-command ever since the drive tests."

"I haven't, and I won't. Surely you don't think I'm enough of a heel, Jim, to step on your toes like that?"

"Nothing like that involved. You tell her, Clee."

"Gunther ability is what counts. You're a Prime, Jim's an Operator; so, now that we can handle the heap, you'll have to be second-in-command whether you like it or not. Any time you can out-Gunther me we'll trade places. And you won't have to take the job away from me—I'll give it to you."

"But no hard feelings, Jim? No reservations? Screens down?"

"None whatever. In fact, I'm relieved. I'm Gunthered for this board here—for that one I'm not. Come in and look; and shake on it."

Belle looked; and while they were shaking hands, she flashed a thought at Lola. "Do you know that we've got two of the finest men that ever lived?"

"I've known that for a long time," Lola flashed back, "but you've hardly started to realize what they *really* are."

"Well, shall we start earning our pay and perquisites by getting to work on this planet, that we haven't even looked—wait a

minute! We're just about to open up the galaxy, aren't we?"

They were.

"Then there'll have to be some kind of a unifying and correlating authority—a Galactic Council or something—and the quicker it's set up the better; the less confusion and turmoil and jockeying-for-position there will be. Question: should this authority be political?"

"It should *not*!" James declared. "It takes United Worlds seven solid days of debate to decide whether or not to buy one lead pencil."

"Military—or naval, I suppose it'd be—that's what Clee's driving at," Belle said. "You're wonderful, Clee—simply priceless! We're officers of the brand-new Galactic Navy. Subject to civilian control, of course, but the civilians will be the United Galaxian Societies of the Galaxy, and nobody else. *Beautiful*, Clee! There are ten Operators, Jim. Right?"

"Check. Brownie and I are here; the other eight are running the Galaxian Society under Clee. And the whole Society eats out of his hand."

"I don't know about that, but Belle and I together could swing it, I think."

"I'll say we could," Belle breathed. "And I simply can't wait to see you kick Fatso's teeth in with *this* one!"

"I don't like the word 'Navy,'" Garlock said. "It's tied definitely to warfare. How about calling it the 'Galactic Service'? Applic-

able to either war or peace. Brass Hats will think of us in terms of war, even though we will actually work for peace. Any objections?"

There were no objections.

"About the uniforms," Lola said, eagerly. "Space-black and star-white, with chromium comets and things on the shoulders . . ."

"To hell with uniforms," Garlock broke in. "Why do women have to go off the deep end on clothes?"

"She's right—you're wrong, Clee," James said. "Without a uniform you won't get off the ground, not even with the Society. And you'll be talking to Top Planetary Brass. Also, they're Gunthered plenty—you can feel their Op field clear out here."

"Could be," Garlock conceded. "Okay, you girls dope it out to suit yourselves. But think you can stand it, Belle, to wear more than twelve square inches of clothes?"

"Wait 'til you see it, chum. I've been designing a uniform for myself for positively *years*."

"I can't wait. And you're a captain, of course."

"Huh? You can't have two cap . . . Oh, I see. Primes. I appreciate that, Clee. Thanks."

"Hold on, both of you," James said. "You haven't thought this through far enough. Suppose we meet forces already organized? Better start high than low. You've got to be top admiral, Clee."

"Rocket-oil! Suppose we don't find anything at all?"

"You're right, Jim," Belle said. "Clee, you talk like a man with a paper nose. It's *you* who's been yowling for two solid years about being ready for *anything*. We've got to do just that."

"Correction accepted. Brief me."

"Ranks should be different from those of United Worlds. They should be descriptive, but impressive. Tops could be Galactic Admiral. That's you. Vice Galactic Admiral; me . . ."

"Galactic Vice Admiral would be better," Lola said.

"Accepted. Those two we'll make stick come hell or space-warps. Right?"

Garlock did not reply immediately. "Up to either one of two points," he agreed, finally.

"What points?"

"War, or being out-Gunthered. Top Gunther takes top place; man, woman, bird, beast, fish, or bug-eyed monster."

"Oh." Belle was staggered for a moment. "No war, of course. As to the other . . . I hadn't thought of that."

"There are a lot of things none of us has thought of, but as amended I'll buy it."

"Then several Regional Admirals, each with his Regional Vice Admiral. Then System Admirals and Vices, and World or Planetary—naming the planet, you know—Admirals and Vices. Let the various Galaxian Societies take over from there down.

How do you like *them* potatoes, Buster?"

"Nice. And formal address, intra-ship, will be Mister and Miss. Jim and Brownie?"

They liked it. "Where do we fit in?" James asked.

"Pick your own spots," Garlock said.

"If we stick to the Solar System we aren't so apt to get bumped by Primes. So make me Solar System Admiral and Brownie my Vice."

"Okay. How long will it take you, Belle, to materialize those uniforms?"

"Fifteen seconds longer than it takes the converter to scan us. Lola's color scheme is right, and I've got everything else down to the last curlicue of chrome. Let's go."

They went: and came back into the Main in uniform. Belle had really done a job.

That of the men, while something on the spectacular side, was more or less conventional, with stiff-visored, screened, heavily-chromed caps; but the women's! Slippers, overseas caps, shorts and jackets—but what jackets!

"Well . . ." Garlock said, after examining the two girls speechlessly for a good half minute. "It doesn't look *exactly* like a spray-on job; but if you ever take a deep breath it'll split from here to there. Fly off—leave you naked as a jay-bird."

"Oh, no. The fabric stretches a little. See? Nothing like a

sweater, but a similar effect—perhaps a bit more so."

"Quite a bit more so, I'd say. However, since Operators and Primes are automatically stacked like Tennick Towers, I don't suppose your recruits will be unduly perturbed at, or will squawk too much about, overexposure. Are we finally ready to go down and get to work?"

"I am," James said. "How do you want to handle it?"

"Run a search pattern. Belle and I will center their Op field and check on Ops and Primes. You two probe at will."

Around and around the planet, in brief bursts of completely incomprehensible speed, the huge ship darted; the biggest, solidest, yet most elusive and fantastic "flying saucer" ever to visit that world. The tremendous oceans and six great continents were traversed; the ice-caps; the frigid, the temperate, and the torrid zones. Wherever she went, powerful and efficient radar scanned and tracked her; wherever she went, excitement seethed.

"Beta Centauri Five," Garlock reported, after a few minutes. "Margonia, they call it. Biggest continent and nation named Nargoda. Capital city Margon; Margon Base on coast nearby. Lots of Gunther Firsts. All the real Gunther, though, is clear across the continent. They're building a starship. Fourteen Ops and two Primes—man and woman. Deggi Delcamp's a big bruiser, with a God-awful lot of

stuff. Ugly as hell, though. He's a bossy type."

"I'm amazed," James played it straight. "I thought all male Primes would be just like you. Timorous Timmies."

"Huh? Oh . . ." Garlock was taken slightly aback, but went on quickly, "What do you think of your opposite number, Belle?" He whistled a wolf-call and made hour-glass motions with his hands. "I'd thought of trading you in on a new model, but Fao Talaho is no bargain, either—and *nobody's* push-over."

"Trade! You tomcat!" Belle's nostrils flared. "You know what that bleached-blond tried to do? High-hat me!"

"I noticed. When we four get down to business, face to face, there should be some interesting by-products."

"You chirped it, boss. Primes seem to be *such* nice people." James rolled his eyes upward and steepled his hands. "If you've got all the dope, no use finishing this search pattern."

"Go ahead. Window dressing. The Brass hasn't any idea of what's going on, any more than ours did."

The search went on until, "This is it," James reported. "Where? Over Margon Base?"

"Check. Kick us over there, ten or twelve hundred miles up."

"On the way, boss. Looks like your theory is about ready to pick."

"It isn't much of a theory yet; just that cultural and evolutionary patterns should be more or

less homogeneous within galaxies. Until it can explain why so many out-galaxies are just alike it doesn't amount to much. By the way, I'm glad you people insisted on organization and rank and uniforms. The Brass is going to take a certain amount of convincing. Take over. Brownie—this is your dish."

"I was afraid of that."

The others watched Lola drive her probe—a diamond-clear, razor-sharp bolt of thought that no Gunther First could possibly either wield or stop—down into the innermost private office of that immense and far-flung base. Through Lola's inner eyes they saw a tall, trim, handsome, fiftyish man in a resplendent uniform of purple and gold; they watched her brush aside that officer's hard-held mental block.

"I greet you, Supreme Grand Marshal Entlore, Highest Commander of the Armed Forces of Nargoda. This is the starship *Pleiades*, of System Sol, Planet Tellus. I am Sol-System Vice-Admiral Lola Montandon. I have with me as guests three of my superior officers of the Galactic Service, including the Galactic Admiral himself. We are making a good-will tour of the Tellus-Type planets of this region of space. I request permission to land and information as to your landing conventions. The landing pad—bottom—of the *Pleiades* is flat; sixty feet wide by one hundred twenty feet long. Area loading is approximately eight

tons per square foot. Solid, dry ground is perfectly satisfactory. While we land vertically, with little or no shock impact, I prefer not to risk damaging your pavement."

They all felt the Marshal's thoughts race. "Starship! Tellus—Sol, that insignificant Type G dwarf! Interstellar travel a commonplace! A ship *that* size and weight—an organized, uniformed, functioning Galaxy-wide Navy and they don't want to *damage my pavement!* My God!"

"Good going, Brownie! Kiss her for me, Jim." Garlock flashed the thought.

Entlore, realizing that his every thought was being read, pulled himself together. "I admit that I was shocked, Admiral Montandon. But landing—really, I have nothing to do with landings. They are handled by ."

"I realize that, sir; but you realize that no underling could possibly authorize my landing. That is why I always start at the top. Besides, I do not like to waste time on officers of much lower rank than my own, and," Lola allowed a strong tinge of good humor to creep into her thought, "the bigger they are, the less apt they are to pass the well-known buck."

"You have had experience, I see," the Marshal laughed. He *did* have a sense of humor. "While landing here is forbidden—top secret, you know—would my refusal mean much to you?"

"Having made satisfactory

contact, I introduce you to Galactic Admiral Garlock. Take over, sir, please."

Entlore winced, for the probe Garlock used then compared to Lola's very much as a diamond drill compares to a piece of soft brass pipe.

"It would mean everything to us," Garlock assured him. "Our mission is a perfectly friendly one. We will have a friendly visit or none. If you do not care for our friendship, another nation will."

"That wouldn't do, either, of course." Entlore paused in thought. "It boils down to this: I must either welcome you or destroy you."

"You may try." Garlock grinned in frankly self-satisfied amusement. "However, the best you can do is lithium-hydride fusion missiles in the hundreds-of-megatons range. Firecrackers. Every once in a while a planet has to try a few such things on us before it will believe that we are powerful as well as friendly. Would you like to test our defenses? If so, I will neither take offense nor retaliate."

Supreme Grand Marshal Entlore was floored. "Why . . . er . . . not at all. I read in your mind . . ." He broke off, to quell an invasion into his own private office. "Damn it, keep *still!*" all four "heard" him yell. "I know they ran a search pattern. I know *that*, too. I know *everything* about it, I tell you! I'm in full rapport with their Su-

preme Grand Admiral. There's only the one ship, they're friendly, and I'm inviting them to land here on Margon Base. Give that to the press. Say also that entrance restrictions to Margon Base will not be relaxed at present. Grand Marshal Holson and ComOff Flurnoy, stay here and tune in. The rest of you get out and *stay out!* Throw all reports about any alien vessel or flying saucer or what-have-you into the waste-basket!"

"Resume command, please, Miss Montandon," Garlock directed; and withdrew his probe from Entlore's mind.

"I thank you, Supreme Grand Marshal Entlore, for your welcome," Lola sent. "I'm sorry that our visits cause so much disturbance, but I suppose it can't be helped. Our Gunther blocks are down. Would you and your two assistants like to teleport out here to us, and con us down yourselves?" Lola knew instantly that they could not, and covered deftly for them. "But of course you can't, without knowing a focus spot here in the Main. Shall I teleport you aboard?"

ComOff Flurnoy's face—she was an attractive, nicely-built red-head wearing throat-mike, earphone, and recorder—turned so pale that a faint line of freckles stood out across the bridge of her nose. She very evidently wanted to scream a protest, but would not. Both men, strangely enough, were eager to go. Instantly all three were

standing in line on the deep-piled rug of the Main, facing the four Tellurians. Seven bodies came rigidly to attention, seven right hands snapped into two varieties of formal salute. Standing thus, each party studied the other for a couple of seconds.

There was no doubt at all as to which two of the visitors the two Nargodian men were studying; but neither of them could quite make up his mind as to which of the black-and-white-clad women to study first or most. The red-head's glance, too, flickered between Belle and Garlock—incredulous envy and equally incredulous admiration lit her eyes.

"At rest, please, fellow-officers," Garlock said, and Lola performed the necessary introductions, adding, "We do not, however, use titles aboardship. Mister and Miss are customary and sufficient."

Behind each row of officers a long davenport appeared; between them a table loaded with sandwiches, olives, pickles, relishes, fruits, nuts, soft drinks, cigars, and cigarettes.

"Help yourselves," Garlock invited. "We serve neither intoxicants nor drugs, but you should find something there to your taste."

"Indeed we shall, and thank you," Entlore said. "Is there any objection, Mr. Garlock, to Miss Flurnoy transmitting information of this meeting and of this ship to our base?"

"None whatever. Send as you

please, Miss Flurnoy, or as Mr. Entlore directs."

"I'm glad I didn't quite scare myself out of coming up here," the Communications Officer said. "This is the biggest and nicest thrill I ever had. Such a thrill that I don't know just where to begin." She cocked an eyebrow at her commanding officer.

"As usual. Whatever you think should be sent." Entlore sent her a steadying thought. Then, as the girl settled back with a sandwich in one hand and a tall glass of ginger-ale in the other, he went on, to Garlock, "She is a very fine and very strong telepath—by our standards, at least."

"By galactic standards also." Garlock had of course been checking. "Accurate, sharp, wide-range, clear-thinking, and fast. Not one of us four could do it any better."

"I thank you, Mr. Garlock," the girl said, with a blush of pleasure—and with scarcely a perceptible pause in her work.

A tour of the ship followed; and as it progressed, the more confused and dismayed the two Nargodian commanders became.

"But no crew at *all*?" Holson demanded incredulously. "How can a thing like this *possibly* work?"

"It's fully Gunthered," Lola explained. "It works itself. That is, almost all the time. Whenever we land on any planet for the first time, one of us has to control it. Or for any other special

job not in its memory banks. When you're ready for us to land I'll show you—it's my turn to work."

"Miss Flurnoy, have they cleared the air over Pylon Six?"

"Yes, sir. Clearance came through five minutes ago. They are holding it clear for us."

"Thank you. Miss Montandon, you may land at your convenience."

"Thank you, sir." Lola took the pilot's chair. "This is the scanner. I pull it over my face and head, so. Since I am always in tune with the field . . ."

"What does *that* mean?" Entlore asked, dark foreboding in his mind.

"I was afraid of that. You can't feel an Operator Field. I'm sorry, sir, but that means you can't handle these forces and never will be able to. Certain Gunther areas of your brain are inoperative. On our scale you are a Gunther First . . ."

"On ours, I'm an Esper Ten, the highest rating in the world—except for a few theoretical crackpots who . . . Excuse me, please, I shouldn't have said that, in view of what I see happening here."

"No offense taken, sir. Those who developed the Gunther Drive were crackpots until they got the first starship out into space. But with this scanner on, I think of where I want to look and I can see it. I then think the ship a few miles sidewise—so—and we are now directly over your Pylon Six. I'm starting

down, but I won't go into free fall."

Apparent weight grew less and less, until: "This is about enough for you, Miss Flurnoy?"

"Just," the ComOff agreed, with a gulp. "One pound less and I'm afraid I'll upchuck that love-ly lunch I just ate."

"We're going fast enough now. Everyone sitting down? Brace yourselves, please. You'll be about fifty percent overweight for a while."

As bodies settled deeper into cushions Entlore sent Garlock a thought. "We three weigh about five hundred pounds. You lifted us—instantaneously or nearly so, but I'll pass the question of acceleration for the moment—eleven hundred miles straight up. How did you repeal the Law of Conservation?"

"We didn't. We have fusion engines of twenty million horsepower. Our Operator Field, which has a radius of fifteen thousand miles and is charged to an electrogravitic potential of one hundred thousand gunts, stores energy. Its action is not exactly like that of an electrical condenser or of a storage battery, but is more or less analogous to both. Thus, the energy required to lift you three came from the field, but the amount was so small that it did not lower the potential of the field by any measurable amount. Setting this ship down—call it sixty thousand tons for a thousand miles at one gravity—will in-

crease the field's potential by approximately one-tenth of one gunt. Have you studied parapsysics?"

"No."

"It wasn't practical, eh?" Garlock smiled. "Then I can't make even a stab at explaining instantaneous translation to you. I'll just say that there is no acceleration involved, no time lapse. There is no violation of the Law of Conservation since departure and arrival points are equi-Guntherial. But what I am really interested in is that small group of high espers you mentioned."

"Yes, I inferred that from Miss Montandon's comments." Entlore fell silent and Garlock watched his somber thoughts picture Margon Base and his nation's capital being attacked and destroyed by a fleet of invincible and invulnerable starships like this *Pleiades*.

"You are wrong, sir," Garlock put in, quietly. "The Galactic Service has not had, does not and will not have, anything to do with intra-planetary affairs. We have no connection with, and no responsibility to, any world or any group of worlds. We are an arm of the United Galaxian Societies of the Galaxy. Our function is to control space. To forbid, to prevent, to rectify any interplanetary or interstellar aggression. Above all, to prevent, by means of procedures up to and including total destruction of planets if necessary, any attempt whatever to form any multi-world empire."



The three Nargodians gasped as one, as much at the scope of the thing as at the calmly cold certainty of ability carried by the thought.

"You are transmitting this precisely, Miss Flurnoy?" Entlore asked.

"Precisely, sir; including background, fringes, connotations, and implications; just as he is giving it to us."

"Let us assume that your Nargodian government decides to conquer all the other nations of your planet Margonia. Assume farther that it succeeds. We will not object; in fact, we will, as a usual thing, not even be informed of it. If then, however, your government decides that one world is not enough for it to rule and prepares to conquer, or take aggressive action against, any other world, we will be informed and we will step in. First, warning will be given. Second, any and all vessels dispatched on such a mission will be annihilated. Third, if the offense is continued or repeated, trial will be held before the Galactic Council and any sentence imposed will be carried out."

In spite of Garlock's manner and message, both marshals were highly relieved. "You're in plenty of time, with us, sir," Entlore said. "We have just sent our first rocket to our nearer moon . . . that is, unless that group of—of espers gets their ship off the ground."

"How far along are they?"

"The ship itself is built, but they are having trouble with their drive. The hull is spherical, and much smaller than this one. It has atomic engines, but no blasts or ion-plates . . . but neither has this one!"

"Exactly; they may be pretty well along. I'd like to get in touch with them as soon as possible. May I borrow a 'talker' like Miss Flurnoy for a few days? You have others, I suppose?"

"Yes, but I'll let you have her; it is of the essence that you have the best one available. Miss Flurnoy?"

"Yes, sir?" Besides reporting, she had been conversing busily with James and Belle.

"Would you like to be assigned to Mr. Garlock for the duration of his stay on Margonia?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" she replied, excitedly.

"You are so assigned. Take orders from him or from any designate as though I myself were issuing them."

"Thank you, sir . . . but what limits? And do I transmit to and/or record for you, sir?"

"No limit. These four Galaxians are hereby granted nationwide top clearance. Transmit as usual whatever is permitted."

"Full reporting is not only permitted, but urged," Garlock said. "There is nothing secret about our mission."

As the *Pleiades* landed: "If you will give us your focus spot, Mr. Entlore, we can all 'port to

your office and save calling staff cars."

"And cause a revolution?" Entlore laughed. "Apparently you haven't been checking outside."

"Afraid I haven't. I've been thinking."

"Take a look. I got orders from the Cabinet to put guards wherever people absolutely must not go, and open everything else to the public. I *hope* there are enough guards to keep a lane open for us, but I wouldn't bet on it." Garlock was very glad that the military men's stiff formality had disappeared. "You Galaxians took this whole planet by storm while you were still above the stratosphere."

There is no need to go into detail concerning the reception and celebration. On Earth, one inauguration of a president and one coronation of a monarch were each almost as well covered by broadcasters, if not as turbulently and enthusiastically prolonged. From the *Pleiades* they went to the Administration Building, where an informal reception was held. Thence to the Capitol, where the reception was very formal indeed. Thence to the Grand Ballroom of the city's largest hotel, where a tremendous — and long-winded — banquet was served.

At Garlock's request, all sixteen members of the "crackpot" group—the most active members

of the Deep Space Club—had been invited to the banquet. And, even though Garlock was a very busy man, his talker tuned in to each one of the sixteen, tuned them all to the Galactic Admiral, and in odd moments a great deal of business was done.

After being told most of the story—in tight-beamed thoughts that ComOff Flurnoy could not receive—the whole group was wildly enthusiastic. They would change the name of their club forthwith to THE GALAXIAN SOCIETY OF MARGONIA. They laid plans for a world-wide organization which would have tremendous prestige and tremendous income. They already had a field—Garlock knew about their ship—they wanted the *Pleiades* to move over to it as soon as possible—Yes, Garlock thought he could do it the following day—if not, as soon as he could.

The *Pleiades* had landed at ten o'clock in the forenoon, local time; the banquet did not come to an end until long after midnight. Throughout all this time the four Galaxians carried on, without a slip, the act that all this was, to them, old stuff.

It was just a little before daylight when they returned, exhausted, to the ship. ComOff Flurnoy went with them. She was still agog at the wonder of it all as Belle and Brownie showed her to her quarters.

*(To be concluded in the next issue)*



# the Spectroscope

by **S. E. COTTS**

**TOMORROW'S GIFT.** By *Edmund Cooper*. 164 pp. Ballantine Books. Paper: 35¢.

Here is a volume of short stories by the brilliant young Englishman who recently burst upon the S-F scene with his novel, *Deadly Image*. These stories, unfortunately, are not all on the high level that one might expect from reading his longer work. Yet, in most cases, one is aware of the fact that Mr. Cooper is a man to watch, and in a few of the stories, such as "M 81: Ursa Major" and "The Butterflies," he achieves the kind of excellence that one finds only in the very top writers of the field. Also welcome is the dry, gently poking humor which graces "Brain Child."

The obstacle against which Cooper stubs his toe is Time. Several of the stories deal with the vagaries and complexities of this dimension which has always been one of the apparently inexhaustible mines of material for the S-F writer. However, Mr. Cooper gets so caught up in his own cleverness (as in the story "A Question of Time") that the result is a gimmick instead of a convincing plot.

Despite this, the prediction made with the publication of his novel still holds—that here is a man to wait for, watch and read.

**THE MONSTER FROM EARTH'S END.** By *Murray Leinster*. 176 pp. Gold Medal Books. Paper: 35¢.

Here is Leinster, once again at the top of his form. From the very first sentence, we are immersed in the dark and somber key of the piece. The tension is built with the sure hand which is Leinster at his best, and it never lets down.

Any attempt at plot summary would only take away from the reader's pleasure. It is enough to say that it concerns a group of scientific and government personnel on an isolated island on the route to Antarctica.

The format of the story is not that of the ordinary S-F book. It has more of the features of the classic detective story, and it is from this aspect that most of the excitement comes. Only in the explanation of the "whodunit" at the end is the story cast back into the science fiction mold. Though it may seem like heresy for an S-F reviewer to say—what Mr. Leinster has done here is more important than filling a book with robots and time machines: he has first of all told a fine story. Since S-F has not yet learned to marry science and story consistently, one cannot be blamed for preferring Mr. Leinster's effort (even though not completely S-F) over some tale with all the outward paraphernalia but no substance.

**THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION.** Edited by Anthony Boucher. 240 pp. Doubleday & Company, Inc. \$3.75.

This is the eighth appearance of this science fiction anthology which has already established itself as a regular feature of the yearly scene. It is a frustrating collection in many ways, however. There are at least three levels of quality present. First and foremost, there are some superb stories by some of S-F's most reliable writers—people who have yet to write a bad story—Avram Davidson, Shirley Jackson, Zenna Henderson, Brian Aldiss, C. M. Kornbluth. There is also a fine story by a new young writer, Kit Reed. This high caliber makes some of the less successful stories all the more disappointing. Certainly Fritz Leiber has written much better stories than the one included here where he substitutes his unique command of the conjure arts for some pseudo-psychology.

Then there is the third category, the poetry. It is uniformly poor with the possible exception of the one in memory of Henry Kuttner. Month after month this column has ranted against S-F stories that are all science and no fiction. But even the worst of those is more to the point than this sort of S-F poetry that's all words and no poetry. Even if the quality were good, the validity of including the poetry in this volume would be open to question. For what is S-F-type poetry anyway? Poetry has always dealt with the things the S-Fer claims as his own, today. Since the beginnings of literature, poets have been writing of the moon and stars. And even aside from that, all good poetry is that which presents the poet's unique view of phenomena that others have taken for granted. Even earlier, the epic poems related the deeds of great men whose actions were superhuman and whose capabilities were a source of wonder to their contemporaries.

So let's have a ninth edition of this fine anthology but minus the poems. Or if Mr. Boucher really feels they belong, a reprinting of *Beowulf* would be just as nearly S-F and much better as literature than the current efforts.



## Or so you say

Dear Editor:

I liked the cover on the January *Amazing*. It was sensible but yet it still had a stand-out appearance. The use of vividly contrasting colors was executed perfectly. Let's hope that we get more covers of this quality in the future. I dread looking back just a year ago at the then garish *Amazing* covers.

P. F. Skeberdis  
401 Hallisy, Ferris Institute  
Big Rapids, Mich.

• *Thanks for the nice words about covers. We have been putting a great deal of effort into improving them. Future covers—by veteran and new artists—look even better to us.*

Dear Editor:

Your December issue was excellent. The most enjoyable short stories were "Deadly Satellite" and "Call Us Prospectors." "Are You Listening" and "Unto the Nth Generation" left something to be desired in their climaxes. The irony of "The Talented Progenitor" and "Reverse English" is something I have not found very often in this type of story and it was quite refreshing.

In the complete novel, "The Big Count-Down" by Charles E. Maine, there is a glaring error in the closing paragraphs. To quote: "Okay. Supposing it succeeded—supposing the rocket became weightless. I always understood that a weightless object possessed no mass and no inertia." Not knowing by what laws of physics the speaker was taught perhaps I should say nothing, but lest he was thinking in terms of good old earth type physics may I remind the writer that an object may have mass and no weight. To illustrate let us suppose he were transported to the point of gravitational equilibrium between the earth and the moon. For all intents and purposes he would be weightless but I hardly think he would cease to be, that is have no mass. A jet plane flying the parabola is for a few seconds weightless but it hardly loses its mass. And while it has a velocity

it certainly is not accelerated to the speed of light or as far as that goes there is no linear acceleration at all.

While the above may sound on the fault finding side, I am not really that critical. Your magazine is one of my favorites and I hope to enjoy it in the future as I have in the past.

Charles A. Osterby  
147-15 Northern Blvd.  
Flushing 54, N. Y.

● *Now, if I am overweight and I run fast enough will I lose a few pounds? And if I trip and fall, does that make a crash diet?*

Dear Editor:

I have been reading s-f for about two years. I used to confine it to full-length novels until a few months ago when I bought a copy of *Amazing*. I have enjoyed it very much and shall continue to buy it as long as you continue with your present high standard of good s-f stories.

I liked the story about Capt. Dark and hope to see more stories about him in the near future.

R. L. Belfare  
RCAF Stn. Senneterre, P.Q.

Dear Editor:

Because I was lonesome for some s-f literature this summer I bought a copy of *Amazing*. I was completely surprised because I never knew that s-f magazines published novels. The copy was the one with "Gold in the Sky" which I enjoyed thoroughly. Now I have become a steady reader of *Amazing*.

I have some suggestions pertaining to changes that I'd like to see: more cartoons by Frosty; the ad column is getting too commercial; the covers are just great but why don't you get one by Emsh? He's the best cover artist on the market today where s-f is concerned.

Peter Lunde  
612 Overhill Rd.  
Ardmore, Pa.

● *Novels a-plenty are coming up. In June, for example, a great complete novel by Poul Anderson. And another Capt. Dark is on its way out of O. H. Leslie's typewriters now.*

Dear Editor:

I thought that "The Hunters Out of Time," was one of the best novels that I've ever read in *Amazing Stories*. I can't really say

enough for it—a fine beginning and ending—an all-time classic to be backed by another fine cover.

James W. Ayers  
609 First Street  
Attalla, Alabama

● *Well, bully for you!*

● *The following are only a few of scores of letters we have received both praising and denouncing Eric Frank Russell for his "Stargazers," an attack on astronomy, in the January Amazing. Queried, Mr. Russell flinched not nor did he waver, but stoutly defended his statements. Perhaps we'll get a letter from him in answer to his critics. Hold your fire, men!*

Dear Editor:

I think *Amazing* is the best s-f magazine around. I do have one complaint and that is with Eric Frank Russell's "Stargazers." I feel that in this article Mr. Russell is being unfair to astronomers. His main theme appears to hinge on the fact that astronomers disagree on many astronomic events. He seems to forget a statement made by William H. Becke (I think it was by him) that goes: "The essence of science is contradiction." Science is always open to new, different and/or contradictory ideas.

This I feel should correct the idea of astronomical disagreement.

Also he meditates on the exactness of astronomers. If he remembers, our Earth has an atmosphere which greatly reduces accuracy in astronomy. As for the different theories they have, they are little more than theories and each man has a right to personal opinion. The great Einstein is noted as saying that nothing is exact (or in one continuum) except the speed of light. In recent findings, by some process, scientists say that even the speed of light is not continual or exact.

He should also remember that most science fiction is based on astronomical entities and truths.

In the January issue I especially liked "The Blonde From Space" and the novel, "No More Sea."

Thomas Obee  
Palms, Mich.

Dear Editor:

Mr. Eric Frank Russell appears to be very intelligent, that is, if you're dumb enough to believe him. His desire to write anything concerning astronomy when he has such an infinitesimal bit of

...OR SO YOU SAY

knowledge at his disposal, is courageous, but his high and mighty attitude is sickening.

Ignoring his first remarks, his first mistake is to say that Dogmatists (you have to become one of these to be an astronomer he insinuates) say it will take half a lifetime to go to Mars or Venus. Poor Eric, his information on astronomers is a hundred years behind the times and he doesn't even know it. He is no astronomer, and never will be at this rate.

He then confidently dismisses any relation between life forms of any kind of high order, and planetary atmospheres, so he is surely no biologist. I could explain, but after all, what's the use?

He then launches into a long section on anti-triangulation. Good heavens! What next! (Maybe the best is yet to come.)

The reader soon gets the impression that astronomers make mistakes on purpose, and then brag about them, but when he takes some island out of the many thousands that exist and points to errors in its measurements to condemn the method and say it is "precisely the same" method that is used by astronomers, that really takes the cake!

I could go through the rest of his article and tear it to literary shreds, but this is a rather thankless task. If you suspect that Mr. Russell is at all sincere, and is brave enough to write for information I would explain to his satisfaction any questions on what he has written.

His article is at best unfair.

Phillip Hawley  
5631 So. Thompson  
Tacoma 8, Washington

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading Eric Frank Russell's article, "Stargazers" which appeared in the January *Amazing Stories*. Tell me, is Mr. Russell simply a cantankerous ignoramus? If so, why on earth did you print the silly article? I suppose it is possible that he is himself a scientist who has received so many crank letters that he decided to write a crank article as a joke. If so, however, he should be advised that it was far too long, and not nearly clever enough to be truly funny.

Henry A. Lackner  
1555 165th Ave.  
San Leandro, Calif.





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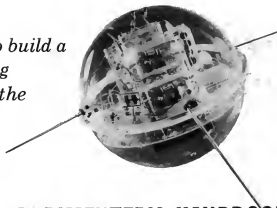
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